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## Marital Satisfaction Among African Americans and Black Caribbeans: Findings From the National Survey of American Life\*

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### Abstract

This study examines the correlates of marital satisfaction using data from a national probability sample of African Americans ( $N = 962$ ) and Black Caribbeans ( $N = 560$ ). Findings reveal differences between African Americans and Black Caribbeans, and men and women within those groups, in the predictors of marital satisfaction. Black Caribbean women reported overall higher levels of marital satisfaction than African American women. The findings amply demonstrate the significance of ethnic diversity within the Black population in the United States. Difficulties with finances (budgeting, credit issues, and debt management) are one of the key issues that generate conflict in marriages; stress generated as a result of financial problems can lower marital satisfaction. Because these issues are salient for couples at any given time in the family life cycle, counseling at critical points in the marriage (birth of children, launching of children from home, and retirement) may be helpful.

### Keywords

African American; Caribbean families; marital quality; marital satisfaction; West Indians

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Over 80% of Americans will eventually marry at some point in their lives (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Reflecting the importance of this social institution, research on marriage and marital relationships enjoys a long and rich history in the areas of family studies and family demography (Cherlin, 2000). However, beyond the demographic information gleaned from Census reports, relatively little is known about marriage and marital relationships among Black Americans and even less about subcultural differences within them. The goal of the present study was to investigate the sociodemographic correlates of marital satisfaction among a national sample of Black adults, focusing in particular on distinctions and

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similarities between the two major subpopulations of African Americans and Black Caribbeans.

The focus on Black Caribbeans (Caribbean Blacks) is motivated by several important considerations. The first concerns the increasing size of this group and their growing proportion of the Black population in specific metropolitan areas (e.g., New York, Miami, Boston) and in the U.S. Black population overall. Between 1990 and 2000, the Black Caribbean population in the United States grew by nearly 67% (Logan & Deane, 2003). Presently, more than 1.5 million Blacks in this country are classified as Caribbean (Logan & Deane). The growth of the Black Caribbean population has surpassed that of established minorities such as Cubans and Koreans, whom Black Caribbeans now outnumber (Logan & Deane). The significant proportion of Black Caribbeans in the United States argues that their separate consideration as a major Black subgroup is warranted and needed.

Second, researchers have called attention to the issue of diversity within the Black population and its potential impact on a variety of outcomes of interest (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). In the present study, we argue that distinctive sociocultural contexts are important in explaining differences between ethnic groups within the Black population (i.e., African Americans, Black Caribbeans). Finally, the vast majority of social science research approaches the study of Black Americans as if they were a single, monolithic group. Empirical explorations of demographic variability, as well as the similarities and differences within and between subgroups of U.S. Blacks, provide important information about sociodemographic and cultural diversity within this population that is consequential for a variety of social and health outcomes.

The present study of the sociodemographic correlates of marital satisfaction among African American and Black Caribbean adults in the United States seeks to (a) determine overall levels of marital satisfaction within these two groups, with an emphasis on possible ethnic group differences in expressed satisfaction, (b) explore how sociodemographic factors and marital characteristics are associated with reported satisfaction with marriage within African American and Black Caribbean adults, and (c) examine whether and in what ways the correlates of marital satisfaction differ for women and men in these two groups. Our substantive focus reflects several prominent issues identified in the literature on marital relations and quality and includes demographic factors, variables related to economic circumstances (i.e., household income, financial strain, material hardship), and marital characteristics (i.e., number of years married, marital history). For Caribbean Blacks, we also examine two variables related to their experiences as immigrants—country of origin and immigration status (i.e., number of years in the United States).

The next sections describe the conceptual framework and relevant background research that inform this study. First, we present a conceptual framework of marriage and marital behaviors that examines the impact of sociocultural context factors such as ethnicity/culture, socioeconomic position, and gender. Following this, we provide a brief summary of research that examines the associations between race, marriage, and marital quality and several key factors (i.e., marriage markets, economic barriers, gender) related to the marital behaviors and attitudes of African Americans. Next, we examine information on the socioeconomic circumstances of African Americans and Black Caribbeans. Following this, we present information on the impact of gender on marital quality. The section ends with a discussion of the literature on marital satisfaction, with particular attention to work focused on African Americans and Black Caribbeans.

## Marriage and Sociocultural Context: A Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that highlights the impact of sociocultural context on marital behaviors and attitudes. Marriage and marital behaviors are the products of many interacting and dynamic factors, including characteristics associated with the individual partners themselves, their relationship and history as a couple, and the broader social and cultural environment. Overall, there has been less emphasis in the literature on the broader context surrounding marriage, despite calls for more focused investigation of the association between marriage and social, cultural, and economic forces (e.g., Timmer & Veroff, 2000) and clear evidence that this context influences marriage rates, marital length and dissolution, as well as marital quality and satisfaction (Adelman, Chadwick, & Baerger, 1996; Dillaway & Broman, 2001; Timmer, Veroff, & Hatchett, 1996; Tucker, Taylor, & Mitchell-Kernan, 1993). The conceptual framework focuses on three sociocultural factors—ethnicity/culture, socioeconomic position, and gender—and their associations with marital satisfaction. As a whole, the marital satisfaction literature is fairly uneven in its treatment of these factors, providing a somewhat fragmented view of the nature of their association with marital behaviors and attitudes, particularly within ethnic and racial minority populations. The proposed conceptual framework suggests that ethnicity/culture, socioeconomic position, and gender are important predictors, in their own right as well as in their interrelated influences on marriage.

Ethnicity and culture are powerful lenses through which individuals and couples construct notions of marriage, family, work-family task enactment and expectations, and economic relations within the context of marriage and family. As described previously, ethnicity is of particular interest to this investigation because it represents a source of unacknowledged and increasing cultural diversity within the U.S. Black population. Above and beyond the sheer numerical growth and influence of Caribbean Blacks in the United States, there are compelling reasons to expect that ethnic identification and the cultural and historical background of this group will influence issues of marriage and family in ways that are distinctive from African Americans. In fact, the literature suggests that motivations for immigration and the experiences of Caribbean Black immigrants in the United States are uniquely structured by the interrelated influences of culture, economics, and gender (Bashi, 2007).

Socioeconomic position has been identified as an important determinant of marital behaviors and perceptions of marital quality (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005; Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999), particularly in relation to African Americans (Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991; Cutrona et al., 2003; Tucker et al., 1993). Given the role of socioeconomic factors in the immigration experience of Caribbean Blacks and noted differences in the economic status of these two groups, we anticipate that associations between such factors and marital satisfaction will be different for Caribbean Blacks and African Americans. Finally, gender has long been an important stratifying variable in relation to women and men's perceptions, attitudes, expectations, and motivations for marriage. Accordingly, the conceptual framework suggests that gender is important in patterning marital satisfaction, resulting in overall differences between women and men for these assessments among both African Americans and Caribbean Blacks. In addition, for women and men within these two groups, the pattern of significant predictors of marital satisfaction will differ as well.

## Sociocultural Context of Marriage Among African Americans

Prior research demonstrates that race and culture play an important role in marital behaviors and attitudes (Adelman et al., 1996; Dillaway & Broman, 2001; Timmer et al., 1996), as well as in shaping opportunities for marriage. Current research suggests that Black women

face significant structural constraints in the likelihood of marriage (Dillaway & Broman; Harknett & McLanahan, 2004; Taylor, Tucker, Chatters, & Jayakody, 1997; Wilson, 1987). Two constraints, the small pool of eligible Black men and economic barriers to marriage, are commonly discussed in the literature with regard to Black marriage rates and the overall quality of marital relationships. These two factors are also related in that the shortage of Black men is thought to negatively impact relationship quality; when men are in short supply, they tend to be less committed to any given relationship (Harknett & McLanahan).

Although the male shortage has been associated with the quality of the marital relationship, it is not necessarily linked to the degree to which Blacks value or approve of marriage. Blacks and Whites are no different from one another in their approval of marriage (Tucker, 2000). Interestingly, however, Blacks are significantly more likely than Whites to disapprove of divorce, particularly when children are involved (Trent & South, 1992). Despite these attitudes, rates of singlehood among Blacks are high and marital satisfaction tends to be low (Taylor et al., 1997; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Perhaps, given the constraints they face, Blacks approach marriage with more caution than other groups and carefully assess its risks and rewards. This assessment of marriage risks and rewards is likely to have great significance for the decision of whether or not to marry. As a group, Blacks embarking on marriage are likely to have poor financial prospects (a marriage risk). Consequently, from a utilitarian perspective, Black men are generally not regarded as financially attractive or viable as marriage partners (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan).

This line of reasoning suggests that the economic circumstances of potential male partners figure prominently in decisions regarding marriage and, after a consideration of likely costs and rewards, Black women may choose to forgo marriage. However, this may not always be the case. Edin (2000) found that although low-income, Black women identify male employment as a necessary factor before considering marriage, it was neither a sufficient reason for them to marry or to remain married if they were dissatisfied with the relationship. A common and erroneous conclusion from findings regarding the role of partner economic viability is that Blacks do not value marriage. On the contrary, Blacks have a great deal of respect for marriage and the two-parent family ideal (Edin & Kefalas, 2005), as demonstrated by the fact that many still do marry despite these significant constraints.

## **Socioeconomic Position Among African Americans and Black Caribbeans**

Blacks in the United States are disproportionately impoverished (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2005). The economic constraints and hardships they face have a deleterious impact on marital satisfaction. Economic hardship, operationalized as chronic economic disadvantage, severe income loss, and heavy demands on resources, constitutes a major stressor on families that compromises the quality of family life. Economic hardship leads to financial or economic strain (i.e., the inability to either pay bills or meet material needs) that, in turn, has a detrimental effect on psychological well-being and marital quality (Conger et al., 1999). Economically disadvantaged couples may argue more frequently and exhibit less warmth and more hostility toward one another (Conger et al.). Clearly, knowledge of economic circumstances and constraints is essential for understanding marital behavior and marital relationships among Black Americans (Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991; Cutrona et al., 2003; Tucker et al., 1993).

Overall, Black Caribbeans have experienced greater economic success than African Americans as reflected in home ownership rates, household income, and labor force participation rates (Kalmijn, 1996; Logan & Deane, 2003). Among the explanations cited to account for this difference is the role of selection factors operating within immigrant populations. Namely, because the majority of people who voluntarily migrate to the United

States do so for economic reasons, as a group they are especially motivated to achieve economic success. Economic migrants also tend to possess valued skills, abilities, and attitudes that would lead to greater financial success (Kalmijn; Model, 1995; Vickerman, 2001). Similarly, economic migrants demonstrate high rates of labor force activity (Model), and Caribbean immigrants, in particular, show greater labor force participation than African Americans (Model) and are more likely than African Americans to have a college degree and higher earnings (Dodoo, 1997; Waters, 1994).

Another explanation for differences in economic achievement for these two groups concerns racial discrimination and ethnic stratification, as well as the specific social and economic niche occupied by Black Caribbean immigrants (Model, 1995; Model & Fisher, 2002; Waters, 1999). Within the complicated U.S. race and social hierarchy, Caribbean Blacks have been able to establish a social identity that gives prominence to their distinctive ethnic affiliation and presumed cultural and social differences from African Americans (Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006; Kalmijn, 1996; Model & Fisher). These presumed differences, particularly in the realm of employment and employee behaviors, have worked in favor of Caribbean immigrants in the workplace. However, the issue of racial and ethnic stratification is dynamic, complex, and highly nuanced. The dynamics of race and ethnic stratification vary by place, time, and circumstances. The long history of Caribbean immigration has been characterized by competing tendencies toward identification with (on the basis of a common racial background) and distancing from (on the basis of ethnic distinctiveness) the native African American population (Vickerman, 1999, 2001).

These contradictory characterizations of the social and economic position of Caribbean immigrants can, in part, be understood in relation to generational status and time spent living in the United States (Waters, 1994). Waters (1994) argues that, over time, Caribbean Blacks' perceptions of U.S. race relations changed in response to their continued exposure to racism and racial discrimination in the workplace and other social spheres. Despite reports of favoritism, more recent evidence suggests that Caribbean Blacks, like African Americans, are geographically and socially segregated from Whites (Logan & Deane, 2003). Moreover, Caribbean Blacks and African Americans, while occupying similar social and geographic spaces, tend nonetheless to be segregated (i.e., ethnic enclaves within Black neighborhoods) from one another (Logan & Deane).

## Gender and Marital Relations

Scholarship on gender suggests that the lower status and power possessed by women in society are mirrored in the marital relationship. This differential in power and status may increase women's vulnerability to negative circumstances that affect the marriage, which, in turn, exacerbates the impact of negative circumstances on their marital satisfaction (Menaghan, 1991; Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Consequently, qualitative aspects of marital life may be experienced differently by men and women. For example, marital strain is greater for women, particularly as women get older (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005). Although a few studies of marital quality suggest no gender differences, most research indicates that women report lower levels of marital quality across several domains (Rogers & Amato, 2000). Further, women begin the marital relationship with lower levels of marital quality compared to men (Umberson et al.). However, despite this initial differential, over the course of the marriage, positive dimensions of marital quality increase, whereas negative dimensions decrease for both men and women (Umberson et al.).

## Marital Satisfaction

Although there is an extremely large and rich literature on marital satisfaction among Whites, there are a limited number of studies addressing this issue among Blacks. The

limited work that does exist indicates that African Americans tend to report lower levels of marital satisfaction than do Whites (Adelmann et al., 1996; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000; Timmer & Veroff, 2000) and are more likely than Whites to think about divorce (Broman, 2002). As found in studies of Whites, higher warmth and lower hostility between African American spouses are associated with higher marital quality (Cutrona et al., 2003). Efforts to understand why satisfaction is generally lower for Blacks have focused on the impact of economic circumstances such as family income and community-level poverty on marriage (Timmer & Veroff). Brody et al.'s (1994) study of a small sample of rural Blacks found a positive association between income and marital happiness. Bryant and Wickrama (2005) reported that higher levels of community poverty were associated with lower levels of marital happiness for African Americans. Similarly, Cutrona et al. (2003) found that among African Americans, community poverty was associated with significantly less warmth between spouses. Residential instability, sometimes used to characterize economically deprived communities, was also associated with lower marital happiness (Bryant & Wickrama). Interestingly, one study focusing on the link between economic resources and marital quality among Black spouses found that *perceptions* of economic adequacy were more closely linked to marital quality than objective measures of occupation, education, and income (Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991).

Regrettably, research on marital satisfaction among Caribbean Blacks in the United States is virtually nonexistent. For instance, several major volumes on Black Caribbean life do not include the term marriage in the index (Bashi, 2007; Foner, 2001; Waters, 1999). Despite a sizable body of high-quality research on Black Caribbeans in the United States, this work generally deals with issues such as migration, identity, discrimination, and socioeconomic status (Dodoo, 1997; Foner, 2001, 2005; Waters, 1999). Fundamental issues regarding marriage and marital life are not addressed in this research, and much of what is known about this population is based upon anthropological (e.g., Foner, 2005) or ethnographic methods (Waters, 1999) of specific Black Caribbean communities residing in U.S. cities (i.e., New York City).

Despite a general lack of information about marriage among Black Caribbeans residing in the United States, there is a limited amount of research on marriage in various Caribbean countries. For instance, in Barbados, marriage rates had been historically low; from 1891 to 1994, the marriage rate has averaged about 5.4 per 1,000 (Barrow, 2001). Common law unions tend to be preferred over marriage in both Barbados and Trinidad (Barrow, 2001), reflecting a historical pattern of family structure for Barbadians. Beginning with the immediate post-Emancipation era, marriage rates were low among Barbadians. Further, patterns of family structure among Barbadian former slaves were markedly different from African American former slaves. During that time, African American slaves married in record numbers (Barrow, 2001; Staples, 1993), such that 90% of African American children were born to married parents (Barrow, 2001). In subsequent years, marriage has become more popular among Barbadians; in 1995, the marriage rate increased to 13.4 and the number of remarriages increased from 316 in 1985 to 1,470 in 1995. Furthermore, from 1980 through 1995, about 15.5% of the petitions filed for divorce involved couples who had been married less than 5 years. However, the majority of petitions (more than 57%) involved couples who had been married for a decade or longer, suggesting that these couples are not ending their marriages upon the first sign of trouble (Barrow, 2001). In contrast, Hamon (2003) reported that marriage is expected in the Bahamas and that people believe that something is wrong if an individual is not married.

Barrow (1996) noted that research on Caribbean families has historically found that marriage is more common among the middle class, although more contemporary research has found that this assumption was not true. For instance, Smith's (1988) qualitative study

of family life in Jamaica and Guyana found that marriage was not the sole province of the middle classes. Further, she notes that among Jamaicans, there is a strong gender differentiation in work-family task enactment with both lower-class and middle-class Jamaican men being much less likely than men in North America to engage in domestic responsibilities or child care.

Discussions of marriage attitudes and behaviors in Jamaica highlight the importance of considering economic, cultural, and historical contexts. Several commentators have noted the emphasis on social status and economic advancement within Jamaican communities and society more generally (Cohen, 1956; Vickerman, 2001). Cohen's study of Jamaica during the 1950s found that the foremost goal of men was to accumulate and maintain economic resources and to avoid situations that endangered those resources. Vickerman (2001) also noted that among Jamaican immigrants in the United States, achievement is measured in material terms (e.g., income, education, home ownership) and comparisons are made to both living standards in the United States and in Jamaica (where unemployment rates are high).

The present study examines the correlates of marital satisfaction within and across representative samples of African Americans and Black Caribbeans. The analyses give special prominence to the impact of ethnicity/culture, economic factors (i.e., income, material hardship, financial strain), and gender on marital satisfaction; the analyses also take into consideration factors that are unique to the situations of Black Caribbeans (i.e., country of origin, immigration history) that may be of consequence to marital satisfaction.

## Method

### Sample

The data for these analyses come from the National Survey of American Life: Coping With Stress in the 21st Century (NSAL). The NSAL was directed by the Program for Research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. The fieldwork for the study was completed by the Institute of Social Research's Survey Research Center in cooperation with the Program for Research on Black Americans. A total of 6,082 face-to-face interviews were conducted with persons aged 18 years or older, including 3,570 African Americans, 891 non-Hispanic Whites, and 1,621 Blacks of Caribbean descent. The NSAL includes the first major study of Black Caribbeans using a probability sample. For the purposes of this study, Black Caribbeans are defined as persons who trace their ethnic heritage to a Caribbean country, but who now reside in the United States, are racially classified as Black, and who are English speaking (but may also speak another language). The overall response rate was 72.3%. Response rates for individual subgroups were 70.7% for African Americans, 77.7% for Black Caribbeans, and 69.7% for non-Hispanic Whites. This response rate is excellent considering that African Americans and Black Caribbeans are more likely to reside in major urban areas that are more difficult and much more expensive places to collect interview data.

The NSAL sample has a national multistage probability design. The African American sample is the core sample of the NSAL. The core sample consists of 64 primary sampling units. Fifty-six of these primary areas overlap substantially with existing Survey Research Center's National Sample primary areas. The remaining eight primary areas were chosen from the South in order for the sample to represent African Americans in the proportion in which they are distributed nationally. Both the African American and the White samples were selected exclusively from these targeted geographic segments in proportion to the African American population. The Black Caribbean sample was selected from two area probability sample frames: the core NSAL sample and an area probability sample of housing units from geographic areas with a relatively high density of persons of Caribbean descent.

In both the African American and the Black Caribbean samples, it was necessary for respondents to self-identify their race as Black. Those self-identifying as Black were included in the Black Caribbean sample if they answered affirmatively when asked if they were of West Indian or Caribbean descent, said they were from a country included on a list of Caribbean area countries presented by the interviewers, or indicated that their parents or grandparents were born in a Caribbean area country (see Jackson et al., 2004, for a more detailed discussion of the NSAL sample). The interviews were face-to-face and conducted in respondents' homes. Respondents were compensated for their time. Data were collected from 2001 to 2003.

**Demographic description**—The analyses for the present study are based on the married subsample of 962 African Americans and 560 Caribbean Blacks ( $N = 1,522$ ). Given our interest in marital satisfaction, only respondents who were married at the time of the interview were included. Of the African Americans, 46% were men and 54% were women. Of the Black Caribbeans, 49% were men and 51% were women. The mean age of the African Americans was 45.47 years ( $SD = 14.01$ ). The mean age of the Black Caribbean sample was 44.66 years ( $SD = 12.83$ ). The mean family income was slightly higher for Black Caribbeans ( $M = \$54,139$ ,  $SD = \$35,921$ ) than for African Americans ( $M = \$50,890$ ,  $SD = \$42,109$ ). The mean level of education among African Americans was 12.74 years ( $SD = 2.48$ ) and among Black Caribbeans, 13.05 years ( $SD = 2.95$ ). The majority of both the African American (74%) and the Black Caribbean samples (79%) had been married only once. About 13% of African Americans were married 1 year or less; 19%, 2 – 5 years; 14%, 6 – 9 years; 22%, 10 – 19 years; and 32%, 20 years or longer. The mean number of years that African Americans were married to their current spouse was 15.46 years ( $SD = 14.41$ ). About 10% of Black Caribbeans were married 1 year or less; 20%, 2 – 5 years; 16%, 6 – 9 years; 28%, 10 – 19 years; and 26%, 20 years or longer. The mean number of years that Black Caribbeans were married to their current spouses was 13.91 years ( $SD = 11.94$ ). About 19% of the Black Caribbeans were born in the United States. Nineteen percent lived in the United States for 10 years or less, 26% lived in the United States for 11 – 20 years, and 36% lived in the United States for 21 years or longer. Of the Black Caribbeans, 10.47% were from the Spanish Caribbean; 19.49%, Haiti; 32%, Jamaica; 10%, Trinidad/Tobago; and 28%, other English-speaking countries (e.g., Barbados, Bahamas; all descriptive statistics were based on unweighted data).

## Measures

Marital satisfaction was measured by the question, “Taking things all together, how satisfied are you with your marriage?” Response categories ranged from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 4 (*very satisfied*; African Americans,  $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ; Black Caribbeans,  $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ). It is important to note that single-item indicators of marital satisfaction are relatively common in research on marital satisfaction, happiness, and quality (e.g., Schoen, Rogers, & Amato, 2006). Additionally, research has found that single-item indicators of marital satisfaction are highly correlated with multi-item measures and provide similar results (Johnson, 1995). Independent variables included: age, gender, number of marriages (one, two, or more marriages), length of marriage (0 – 1, 2 – 5, 6 – 9, 10 – 19, and 20 or more years), education, income (log income), financial strain, and material hardship. *Financial strain* was an index of two variables: difficulty paying bills and worrying about income. *Difficulty paying bills* was measured by asking, “How difficult is it for you to meet monthly payments of your family’s bills?” rated on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = *extremely difficult*, 1 = *not difficult at all*). *Worrying about income* was assessed by asking, “How much do you worry that your total (family) income will not be enough to meet your family’s expenses and bills”—rated on a 4-point Likert scale (4 = *a great deal*, 3 = *a lot*, 2 = *a little*, 1 = *not at all*; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .79$  for African Americans,  $.77$  for Black Caribbeans). The mean score for

financial strain for African Americans was 3.54 ( $SD = 1.73$ ) and for Black Caribbeans, 4.10 ( $SD = 1.84$ ).

Material hardship was assessed by asking seven questions aimed at ascertaining whether or not certain events occurred. For example, respondents were asked, “In the past 12 months was there a time when you ... didn’t pay full rent or mortgage; were evicted for non-payment; had gas, electric, oil disconnected; or had the telephone disconnected?” Respondents replied either “yes” or “no.” “Yes” replies were coded as “1” and were summed; higher scores reflect greater material hardship (African Americans,  $M = 0.78$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ; Black Caribbeans,  $M = 0.78$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ). Cronbach coefficient alphas were .80 and .75 for African Americans and Black Caribbeans, respectively.

In addition, two variables that are particularly relevant to the Black Caribbean population in the United States are included in the analyses—immigration status and country of origin. *Immigration status* has four categories (i.e., respondent was born in the United States; respondent immigrated to the United States less than 11 years ago, 11 – 20 years ago, 21 or more years ago). Black Caribbean respondents reported over 25 different countries of origin. For purposes of analysis, the variable, *Country of Origin*, was recoded into five categories: Jamaica, Trinidad-Tobago, other English-speaking country (e.g., Barbados), Spanish-speaking country (e.g., Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic), and Haiti (correlations are presented in Table 1).

### Analysis Strategy

Regression analyses were conducted using SUDAAN 9.0. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. For selected significant relationships, effect sizes are reported using SUDAAN 9.0. To obtain effect sizes, the regression models were reanalyzed with marital satisfaction standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Thus, for each independent variable, the beta coefficients from the regression models represent differences in mean scores on the standardized dependent variable and the predictors. In absolute terms, these differences can be interpreted as effect size differences with values of .3 representing small effect sizes and values of .8 representing large effect sizes. All statistical analyses performed were design based, in that they (a) used sampling weights accounting for both the individual-level unequal probabilities of selection into the NSAL sample and the individual nonresponse to calculate weighted, nationally representative population estimates and (b) accounted for the complex multistage clustered design of the NSAL sample when computing standard errors.

## Results

Sixty-eight percent of African Americans and 63% of Black Caribbeans indicated that they were very satisfied with their marriages. Regression analyses revealed that there was no significant difference between African Americans and Black Caribbeans in degree of marital satisfaction (analysis not shown). We then examined men and women separately. Although analyses did not reveal a significant difference in marital satisfaction between African American and Black Caribbean men, Black Caribbean women reported significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction than did African American women ( $B = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ , effect size = .24).

### Marital Satisfaction: African Americans

As indicated in Model 1 (Table 2), African American women were less satisfied with their marriages than were African American men (effect size =  $-.35$ ). Further, the correlates of marital satisfaction were different for African American men and women. For African

American men (Model 2), education was negatively associated with marital satisfaction. Among African American women, age, number of years married, and financial strain were significantly associated with marital satisfaction. Older African American women had higher levels of marital satisfaction than their younger counterparts. Women who were married less than 2 years (effect size = .52) and those married 6 – 9 years (effect size = .36) had higher levels of satisfaction than women married 20 or more years. Lastly, African American women with higher levels of financial strain were less satisfied with their marriages (effect size = -.13).

### **Marital Satisfaction: Black Caribbeans**

Results for Black Caribbeans differed in several ways from those obtained for African Americans. There were no gender differences with regard to marital satisfaction for Black Caribbeans (Model 4). Also, income was significantly associated with marital satisfaction for both Black Caribbean men and women (effect size = .36). Analyses of Black Caribbean men (Model 5) indicated that the number of years of marriage and immigration status were significantly associated with marital satisfaction. Black Caribbean men who were married 20 or more years had significantly higher levels of satisfaction than those married 10 – 19 years. In addition, Black Caribbean men who had immigrated to the United States 11 – 20 years ago and 21 or more years ago were more satisfied with their marriages than Black Caribbean men who were born in the United States. Regression analyses of Black Caribbean women (Model 6) indicated that those who were married for 20 years or more had higher levels of satisfaction than those married 2 – 5 years. Additionally, Black Caribbean women from Jamaica had higher levels of satisfaction than those from the Spanish Caribbean (i.e., Puerto Rico, Cuba, Dominican Republic) and those from Haiti.

### **Discussion**

The study findings indicated that gender, ethnicity, and economic factors were associated with reports of marital satisfaction. Both African American and Black Caribbean respondents reported relatively high levels of marital satisfaction and the two groups were no different in terms of marital satisfaction. Black Caribbean women, however, reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than African American women. Overall, gender, in particular, displayed an interesting pattern of relationships indicating several differences in the correlates of marital satisfaction for African American men and women, as well as Black Caribbean men and women. Among African American men, education was negatively associated with marital satisfaction. Age, length of marriage, and financial strain were associated with satisfaction among African American women. Among Black Caribbeans, household income, rather than financial strain, was associated with satisfaction. Among Black Caribbean men, length of marriage and immigration status were linked to satisfaction, whereas among Black Caribbean women, length of marriage and country of origin were associated with satisfaction.

Consistent with the general literature on African Americans, gender was significantly associated with marital satisfaction such that women had lower levels of satisfaction than did men. This finding is consistent with previous research among both Whites (Wu & Hart, 2002) and African Americans (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005), which indicates that men receive more benefits from marriage than do women and, as a consequence, women report lower levels of marital satisfaction (Dillaway & Broman, 2001). Among Black Caribbeans, however, it is interesting to note that there were no gender differences in marital satisfaction. Additionally, Black Caribbean women reported higher levels of satisfaction than did African American women. This pattern of findings for gender could be associated with differences between African Americans and Black Caribbeans in marital expectations and beliefs, as well as actual marital and family behaviors.

Foner (2005) found that Jamaican women who migrated to New York expressed a considerable degree of satisfaction with the more egalitarian division of household responsibilities they encountered in the United States. Jamaican husbands in the United States were more likely to provide assistance with child care and basic household chores (e.g., laundry), whereas in Jamaica, husbands did not perform any household duties. Further, couples who migrated from Jamaica spent more time together in leisurely activities after they arrived in the United States (Foner, 2005). This is attributed to a greater emphasis in the U.S. on the value of “family togetherness” as compared to Jamaica (Foner, 2005, p. 176). Collectively, the stronger emphasis on egalitarian marital roles and behaviors as well as the expressed value of spending more time together as a family may both serve to enhance marital satisfaction among Black Caribbean women.

Ethnicity and culture are important in shaping the nature of social relationships such as marriage, as well as in shaping the beliefs, norms, and expectations of these relationships. Several researchers have suggested that, as a group, immigrants have particularly high levels of religiosity and religious conservatism (Warner, 1998). In fact, religious expression is thought to be an important means of establishing an identifiable and separate identity among Black Caribbean immigrants (McAlister, 1998). Further, Black Caribbean immigrants may also be more socially conservative than both African Americans and Whites (Vickerman, 2001). Religious and social conservatism may support more traditional and shared notions of marriage and marital role expectations that, in turn, translate into greater satisfaction with marriage.

Related to this, aspects of ethnic identity itself may be important in shaping a more traditional view of marital expectations and roles among Black Caribbeans. For example, Black Caribbean women, in particular, may adhere to a more traditional view of marriage, which emphasizes conventional gender and marital roles (e.g., division of labor, power). In contrast, African American women may subscribe to less traditional views of marriage in which gender roles, marital roles, and marital expectations are less clearly defined or open, or both, for negotiation in their relationships. This may give rise to lower levels of marital satisfaction, particularly for African American women, and reflect the difficulty of reconciling the reality of their marital experiences with a diverse range of expectations and norms regarding the marital relationship. Essentially, because the marital relationships of Black Caribbean women are characterized by more traditional views of marriage and shared goals and expectations, they are more similar to their male counterparts in their assessments of marital satisfaction. On the other hand, African American women may have expectations for marriage that are more firmly based on notions of gender equality in marital roles and obligations. Consequently, they may find that the reality of married life fails to live up to idealized notions of marital roles and norms, thus giving rise to lower levels (compared to Black Caribbean women and African American men) of marital satisfaction.

Study findings also indicated that, consistent with other research in this area (Kulik, 2002), the correlates of marital satisfaction also differed for men and women. Among African American men, education was negatively associated with marital satisfaction; however, education and marital satisfaction were unrelated among African American women. Previous findings regarding education and marital satisfaction are mixed, sometimes indicating a positive association between education and marital quality (Lev-Wiesel & Al-Krenawi, 1999). Kulik reported a positive association between education and marital satisfaction for husbands but no significant association for wives. In one study of African American couples, education predicted warmth observed between couples but did not predict observed hostility between couples or marital quality (Cutrona et al., 2003). Results from this study and previous research suggest that more work is needed to unravel the

relationships between education and different aspects of marital quality and how that may differ by gender and race.

Financial strain (i.e., difficulty paying bills, worrying about income) was negatively associated with marital satisfaction among African American women. It is important to note that the effect size for this relationship was very small,  $-.13$ , suggesting the finding may have limited practical significance. In contrast, more behaviorally based reports of household income and material hardship were not significantly associated with marital satisfaction. These findings are consistent with previous work on the detrimental effect of economic stress on marital quality (e.g., Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991; Conger et al., 1999). However, an entirely different picture emerges with respect to these relationships among Caribbean Blacks. For both Black Caribbean men and women, household income was positively associated with marital satisfaction, whereas financial strain and material hardship were not. The sole significance of household income as a predictor of marital satisfaction may be rooted in a set of distinctive cultural values stressing achievement and success as a means of defining self and one's social status. Specifically, Vickerman (2001) noted that Jamaican immigrants hold strong cultural values that emphasize achievement as measured by educational, occupational, and material success. Self-perceptions similarly emphasize attributes such as being goal-oriented, success-driven, and hard-working (Vickerman, 2001, p. 207). The attainment of tangible indicators of success (e.g., high incomes, home ownership) is gained through a strategy in which resources are pooled and multiple household members participate in the labor market. Given this orientation, objective reports of household income may be the primary way that Caribbean respondents measure their economic standing. Further, given the prominence of objective measures of success such as income in defining self, household income may be the critical determinant of satisfaction with marriage. The present findings indicate that for Caribbean Blacks, household income is more important than perceptions of financial strain or hardship in predicting marital satisfaction. Collectively, these findings reinforce both the importance of including various assessments of financial circumstances when examining marital satisfaction and the need to further explore the significance and meaning of these measures for particular subgroups of the population.

Turning to findings for African American women, age was positively associated with marital satisfaction, indicating that older African American women reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than their younger counterparts. This finding is consistent with the work of Umberson et al. (2005), who found that older adults had higher levels of marital satisfaction. The unique social location of older African American women may help contextualize this finding. First, older married African American women have peers who are much more likely to be widowed, divorced, or never married than married (Taylor et al., 1997). Second, married older African American women are one of the most religious groups in the United States, and religious individuals, generally, tend to have higher levels of overall satisfaction, as well as specifically marital satisfaction (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Number of years married was also associated with marital satisfaction among African American women. Women who had been married for less than 2 years and for 6 – 9 years had higher levels of satisfaction than women who had been married for 21 or more years. The higher level of satisfaction for African American women who had been married for less than 2 years is clearly a honeymoon effect, whereas the higher level for those married 6 – 9 years is less clear.

Number of years married was associated with marital satisfaction among Black Caribbean men and women, although the patterns were different. Among Black Caribbean men, those married 11 – 20 years had lower levels of satisfaction than those married 21 or more years. Among Black Caribbean women, those married 2 – 5 years had lower levels of satisfaction

than those married 21 years or more. The lower levels of satisfaction among Black Caribbean women who have been married 2 – 5 years are consistent with work indicating that this is a difficult adjustment period for many couples and that this is a period in which many couples divorce (Shehan & Kammeyer, 1997). The relationship between the number of years married and the marital satisfaction among Black Caribbeans is closer to the classic U-shaped pattern with individuals indicating higher levels of satisfaction at the very beginning of the marriage and after a substantial number of years of marriage. It is important to note that this classic pattern may not be typical of more recent marital and relationship patterns. Currently, many couples date or live together for a number of years prior to marriage. For them, years of marriage, per se, underestimates the longevity of their relationship. Among African Americans, in particular, many couples enter marriages with children. These observations suggest that, for some couples, many of the major transitions and events of married life (which are presumed to influence marital satisfaction) are occurring prior to actual marriage. As such, we are missing important opportunities for understanding how a range of structural, couple and individual factors and events are associated with qualitative assessments of long-term relationships. Future research employing a life course perspective and longitudinal data sets can more accurately examine the association between length of marriage/relationship and marital satisfaction.

These analyses used two variables that were specific to the Black Caribbean population, immigration status and country of origin. Among Black Caribbean men, immigration status was significantly associated with marital satisfaction, such that men who immigrated to the United States 11 – 20 years ago and 21 or more years ago had higher levels of marital satisfaction than Caribbean Black men born in the United States. Among Black Caribbean women, women from Jamaica had higher levels of marital satisfaction than those from Haiti and those from Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries (i.e., Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico). These findings are consistent with the previous ethnographic work of Foner (2005), who found that Jamaican women had high levels of marital satisfaction because of the more egalitarian division of household responsibilities and the greater emphasis on spending leisure time as a couple in the United States.

## Implications and Conclusions

The institution of marriage has numerous psychological, social, and economic benefits for individuals, families, and children. Throughout the life course, the marital relationship is a critical resource for social and emotional support and confers several financial, legal, and material advantages. For example, the likelihood of living in poverty increases for mothers and children as a result of divorce and nonmarital child-bearing (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Older African Americans who are married are less likely to live in poverty, less likely to live alone, have larger informal social support networks, and are more likely to have a caregiver when ill (Tucker et al., 1993). On the other hand, poorly functioning marriages can negatively impact both the emotional and the physical well-being of couples and their children (Waite & Gallagher). Ongoing basic and policy research is needed to examine marital relationships and the factors associated with the health and longevity of those relationships. In addition, this research should take several points into consideration.

First, it is important to clearly acknowledge that rates of nonmarital unions and single-parent families are increasing and that currently a plurality of relationship forms exists. The eagerness to uphold marriage should not be at the expense of our attention to and efforts on behalf of single-parent families and nonmarital unions and families. To do so would only further privilege marital relationships, discredit and stigmatize single-parent families and nonmarital unions, and effectively relegate them to second-class status. Innovative research and public policy are needed to buttress marriages, as well as address the needs of a growing

number of nonmarried adults and nonmarital relationships and families. Second, an important part of our research and policy agenda should be to examine the meaning and status of marriage within diverse groups of the population to better understand the impact of factors such as race, culture, and socioeconomic status on marriage longevity and dissolution. Finally, too little attention is paid to the impact of broader contextual factors, institutions, and environments (e.g., neighborhood, community) on marriage. For the most part, our current research paradigms and policy responses to the marriage crisis are largely concentrated on the marital dyad and on the psychological and social factors inherent to the couple or factors that impinge on them as stressors or resources. However, marriage does not occur in a vacuum; the broader social environment (e.g., norms, expectations) makes a number of contributions to the health of marriages. In addition, it is important to consider how economic concerns and trends (e.g., wage structures, labor market trends, rates of employment, unemployment, underemployment) inform the broader context of marriage and the extent to which these factors affect the marital strategies and decisions that individuals and couples make. Fortunately, recent research and policy have begun to take economic considerations into account.

The reauthorization of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families included \$150 million for programs designed to foster the development and maintenance of healthy marriages and to promote father involvement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). The Healthy Marriage Initiative was created in 2002, as a means of facilitating access to marriage education services for couples (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). In addition to increasing the proportion of couples in healthy marriages, several of the other goals of the initiative include: (a) enhancing public awareness about the value of healthy marriages, (b) increasing the proportion of people living in nonviolent homes, and (c) increasing the proportion of children living in homes with two parents who are in healthy marriages. Specifically, grants and funding are provided for services such as premarital and marriage education, marriage enhancement training, parenting skills, financial management, conflict resolution, and job/career advancement for couples who are married and for those who intend to marry (e.g., engaged).

An important feature of the Healthy Marriage Initiative centers on developing financial literacy and management skills. Financial circumstances certainly improve with marriage, but this does not mean that once married, couples are without financial concerns. On the contrary, difficulties in the area of finances are one of the key issues that generate conflict in marriages. Stress generated as a result of financial problems can lower marital satisfaction, which, in turn, can lead to marital dissolution. Given the prominence of financial concerns in many marriages, financial counseling should be a required component of all marital and premarital counseling programs. Financial counseling could include topics such as budgeting, credit issues, debt management, and wealth generation. Further, because these issues are salient for couples at any given time in the family life cycle, counseling at critical points in the marriage (birth of children, launching of children from home, and retirement) may be helpful in addressing the various financial demands experienced.

These analyses benefited from the availability of a nationally representative sample of African Americans and Black Caribbeans (adjusting for complex sample design) and the use of several measures of socioeconomic status. The analyses and results are an important complement to the small group of studies on marital satisfaction among African Americans and provide one of the first examinations of marital satisfaction among Black Caribbeans. However, despite these advantages, it is important to recognize that one of the limitations of this sample is that it excludes individuals who do not speak English. In this case, non-English-speaking Black Caribbeans (i.e., persons who speak Spanish, Haitian-French, or Creole dialects) are not included in the sample, and as a consequence, the study findings are

not generalizable to these groups. The analyses do not include measures of work-family ideology, the division of household labor, or marital conflict, which are known to impact marital satisfaction, and it uses a single-item measure of marital satisfaction. Nonetheless, this study provides an unparalleled opportunity to begin important explorations into the nature of marital satisfaction within these two groups.

Marriage is a salient aspect of emotional and financial well-being. However, by itself, it is not sufficient to ensure the well-being of Black Americans. Basic structural issues such as poverty, lack of health insurance, and insecure employment do not become insignificant once individuals marry. The enduring vulnerabilities of working poor families who are headed by a married couple—irrespective of race and ethnicity—make it clear that these basic structural issues will not be resolved by marriage alone. It will take more than marital unions to improve—in a real, practical sense—the financial well-being of individuals living well below the poverty level. We, as a society, have a responsibility to those individuals that should go beyond the rhetoric and the disingenuous suggestion that marriage is a cure-all.

In conclusion, the present study's findings demonstrated heterogeneity in the Black population for marital satisfaction, as well as gender and ethnic group differences in the variables associated with marital satisfaction for African Americans and Black Caribbeans. Future research should explore other dimensions of marital quality among the various ethnic groups within the Black American population, with specific attention to within-group differences. Future research should also explore the types, extent, and qualitative aspects (e.g., satisfaction, perceptions, expectations) of various types of intimate relationships (e.g., dating, cohabiting, long-term nonmarital relationships) among individuals in these groups.

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**Table 1**  
Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Demographic Variables and Marital Satisfaction

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Marital satisfaction	—	.08*	-0.07	-0.035	.13*	.04	-0.10*	-0.09*	.03	-0.00
2. Age	.14***	—	-0.20***	.31***	.03	-0.10*	-0.11*	-0.17***	.13**	.09*
3. Gender	-0.21***	-0.14***	—	-0.12**	-0.03	.09*	.02	.07	-0.05	.03
4. Number of years married	.05	.28***	-0.05	—	-0.03	-0.06	-0.02	.09*	-0.04	-0.02
5. Income	-0.00	-0.09**	-0.02	.00	—	.41***	-0.29***	-0.14***	-0.14***	.09*
6. Education	-0.00	-0.24***	.12***	.12***	.48***	—	-0.28***	-0.13**	-0.16***	-0.08
7. Financial strain	-0.19***	-0.09**	.01	-0.02	-0.31***	-0.17***	—	.42***	.13*	-0.01
8. Economic hardship	-0.16***	-0.15***	.05	-0.02	-0.25***	-0.07*	.50***	—	-0.04	.06
9. Immigration status									—	.09*
10. Country of origin										—

Note. African Americans (N = 962) below diagonal and Caribbean Blacks (N = 560) above diagonal.

\* p < .05.

\*\* p < .01.

\*\*\* p < .001 (two tailed).

**Table 2**  
Regression Coefficients for Marital Satisfaction by Ethnicity and Gender (SEs in parentheses)

Predictors <sup>a</sup>	Model 1: African Americans	Model 2: African American Men	Model 3: African American Women	Model 4: Black Caribbeans	Model 5: Black Caribbean Men	Model 6: Black Caribbean Women
Age	.00* (.00)	.00 (.00)	.01* (.00)	-0.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	-0.00 (.00)
Gender						
Female	-0.26*** (.05)	—	—	-0.05 (.09)	—	—
Number of marriages						
Two or more	-0.01 (.05)	.02 (.06)	-0.03 (.08)	.00 (.12)	.14 (.08)	-0.18 (.15)
Number of years married						
10 – 19	-0.02 (.08)	-0.10 (.07)	.09 (.13)	-0.10 (.10)	-0.26* (.10)	.12 (.10)
6 – 9	.10 (.08)	-0.06 (.09)	.30** (.11)	-0.08 (.14)	-0.09 (.13)	.04 (.10)
2 – 5	.06 (.08)	-0.00 (.09)	.17 (.11)	-0.026 (.16)	-0.07 (.17)	-0.42** (.15)
0 – 1	.21** (.07)	.01 (.08)	.43*** (.12)	.07 (.26)	.05 (.20)	.25 (.17)
Log household income	-0.03 (.03)	.00 (.04)	-0.05 (.05)	.14* (.04)	.13*** (.04)	.12* (.06)
Years of education	-0.02** (.01)	-0.02* (.01)	-0.03 (.02)	-0.00 (.01)	-0.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Financial strain	-0.06*** (.02)	-0.02 (.02)	-0.10*** (.04)	-0.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)	-0.04 (.03)
Material hardship	-0.03 (.02)	-0.04 (.03)	-0.02 (.03)	.00 (.03)	-0.03 (.03)	.01 (.02)
Immigration status (years)						
Less than 10	—	—	—	.16 (.19)	.33 (.20)	.18 (.16)
11 – 20	—	—	—	.25 (.15)	.39* (.15)	.23 (.12)
21 or more	—	—	—	.21 (.13)	.32* (.16)	.19 (.14)
Country of origin						
Spanish Caribbean	—	—	—	-0.13 (.14)	.26 (.14)	-0.76*** (.19)
Haiti	—	—	—	-0.07 (.07)	.10 (.11)	-0.33** (.10)
Trinidad and Tobago	—	—	—	-0.18 (.11)	-0.20 (.13)	.06 (.12)
Other English	—	—	—	-0.04 (.07)	-0.06 (.10)	.08 (.11)
Constant/intercept	4.30*** (.39)	4.01*** (.46)	4.31*** (.73)	2.25** (.75)	1.99** (.68)	2.42** (.78)
R <sup>2</sup>	.114***	.055***	.102***	.111***	.192***	.300***

Predictors <sup>a</sup>	Model 1: African Americans	Model 2: African American Men	Model 3: African American Women	Model 4: Black Caribbeans	Model 5: Black Caribbean Men	Model 6: Black Caribbean Women
<i>N</i>	928	424	504	528	260	268

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are presented

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*N* = 962 African Americans and *N* = 560 Black Caribbeans.

<sup>a</sup> Several of the independent variables are represented by dummy variables. Gender: male is the excluded category; number of marriages: 1 is the excluded category; number of years married: 20 or more years is the excluded category; immigration status: born in the United States is the excluded category; and country of origin: Jamaica is the excluded category.