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The Couple That Prays Together: Race and Ethnicity, Religion, and Relationship Quality Among Working-Age Adults

A substantial body of research has shown that relationship quality tends to be (a) lower among racial and ethnic minorities and (b) higher among more religious persons and among couples in which partners share common religious affiliations, practices, and beliefs. However, few studies have examined the interplay of race or ethnicity and religion in shaping relationship quality. Our study addresses this gap in the literature using data from the National Survey of Religion and Family Life (NSRFL), a 2006 telephone survey of 2,400 working-age adults (ages 18–59), which contains oversamples of African Americans and Latinos. Results underscore the complex nature of the effects of race and ethnicity, as well as religious variables. In particular, we found that couples' in-home family devotional activities and shared religious beliefs are positively linked with reports of relationship quality.

During the past half century, the United States has witnessed dramatic changes in the nature, quality, and stability of intimate relationships—from increases in divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation to delays in the age of first marriage. Most notably, marriage has become increasingly fragile over the same period (Cherlin, 2004). Although these changes have influenced all sectors of U.S. society, they have been particularly consequential for racial and ethnic minorities, especially African Americans (Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). For instance, according to recent Census estimates, fewer than half of Blacks (34% of men, 28% of women) and Hispanics (43% of men, 46% of women) are now married and living with their spouse; by contrast, more than half of all non-Hispanic White adults (58% of men, 54% of women) are married and living with their spouse (Kreider & Simmons, 2003). Studies have also shown that African Americans who do marry experience lower relationship quality and greater risk of marital

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disruption (i.e., divorce or separation) than do non-Hispanic Whites (Broman, 2005; Phillips & Sweeney, 2006). Finally, African Americans and especially Hispanics are more likely to have children born into cohabiting unions than are non-Hispanic Whites, and such cohabiting relationships are more likely to be characterized by instability and lower relationship quality than are marital relationships (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Landale & Oropesa, 2007).

Although scholarly attention has increasingly been directed toward the causes and correlates of relationship quality among Blacks and Hispanics (Broman, 2005; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000), as well as differences in relationship quality by race and ethnicity (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts 2005), there has been surprisingly little attention to the role that religion may play in influencing the quality of marriages and intimate relationships for Blacks and Hispanics, or in accounting for racial and ethnic differences in relationship quality. This is surprising given that, in recent years, family researchers have refocused attention on the role of religious factors in shaping relationship quality among married and cohabiting couples. Although some studies have reported little or no association between religion and relationship quality (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995), most studies have shown salutary or protective effects of religious involvement on relationship quality (Call & Heaton, 1997; Myers, 2006; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). This oversight is also surprising because a wealth of evidence reveals that African Americans tend to be more religious, by virtually any conventional indicator, than are non-Hispanic Whites from otherwise similar backgrounds (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Although one recent study focused on religion and relationship quality among African Americans and non-Hispanic Whites (Furdyna, Tucker, & James, 2008), we are aware of no published work that explores this topic among Mexican Americans or other Latino groups, a striking gap in the literature in light of the rapid growth of the Hispanic population in the United States (Suro, 2005), as well as the distinctive religious cultures of Latinos (Espinosa, Elizondo, & Miranda, 2003). Moreover, no study has sought to explore how religion may augment or reduce racial and ethnic differences in relationship quality.

Our study augments the literature in several notable ways. We concentrate on the potentially salutary effects for Black, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White couples of several specific aspects of religion: (a) denominational homogamy, (b) joint regular religious attendance, (c) shared beliefs and values, and (d) shared home worship activities. Specifically, we explore the links between religion and relationship quality by analyzing data from a new, nationally representative sample of working-age (18 – 59 years) adults with oversamples of African Americans and Latinos: the National Survey of Religion and Family Life (NSRFL). We discuss results in terms of (a) our understanding of the mechanisms through which religion may contribute to relationship quality among married and unmarried couples, (b) the distinctive role of religious beliefs and values among racial and ethnic minority communities, and (c) the role that religion plays in reducing racial and ethnic differences in relationship quality.

Religion and Relationship Quality

How and why might religious involvement be linked to relationship quality? Previous research on religion and relationship quality has suggested that family-centered norms and social networks associated with religious congregations, along with the subjective well-being fostered by religious belief, help account for the association between religion and higher quality relationships (for a review, see Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). First, religious communities typically promote generic norms (e.g., the Golden Rule) and relationship-specific norms (e.g., forgiveness) that help define appropriate marital and relationship conduct, encourage partners to fulfill their familial roles and responsibilities, and handle conflict in a constructive manner (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006; Wilcox, 2004). Second, family-centered social networks found in religious communities offer formal and informal support to couples and families—from financial help to models of healthy relationships—that can help couples navigate the challenges of married or romantic life (Edgell, 2006; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995). Such networks also tend to lend explicit or implicit support to conventional and religiously grounded norms about appropriate relationship

conduct—such as sexual fidelity (Atkins & Kessel, 2008; Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007). Third, subjective religious belief seems to provide people with a sense of purpose and meaning about life in general and their relationship in particular. This general sense of purpose and meaning is valuable as a buffer against the stresses that can harm relationships (Ellison, 1994). For all these reasons, religious persons may enjoy higher quality relationships.

The literature on religion and relationship quality suggests that religious homogamy is a particularly powerful influence on the quality of married and unmarried intimate relationships. Indeed, recent research exploring the family–religion nexus suggests that religious homogamy generally facilitates better relationships within the family, whereas religious heterogamy can be linked to negative outcomes within the family—from domestic violence to poor-quality parent–child relationships (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999; Pearce & Axinn, 1998; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006). In particular, homogamy in religious affiliation, attendance, and belief appears to foster higher quality relationships among contemporary couples.

According to several studies, marital happiness and satisfaction are somewhat higher in same-faith unions (Heaton & Pratt, 1990; Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Why is denominational homogamy associated with higher levels of relationship quality? Religious affiliation is linked with beliefs about marriage, sexuality, gender roles and household organization, child rearing, and a host of additional issues that confront domestic partners. Couples from similar denominational backgrounds may find relatively few points of disagreement when negotiating these choices, whereas partners from disparate religious backgrounds may harbor discordant assumptions about appropriate lifestyles and conduct that become evident when reaching concrete decisions (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). Studies also indicate that when mixed-faith marriages involve one conservative (i.e., fundamentalist or Evangelical) Protestant or one sectarian (e.g., Mormon) partner, they are especially prone to disharmony and dissolution, in part because partners in such relationships are probably more likely to have serious disagreements about important family or relationship choices facing them (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009).

Research also has indicated that joint religious participation or similarities in participation patterns are positively linked with relationship quality among married and unmarried couples, for several possible reasons (Call & Heaton, 1997; Heaton & Pratt, 1990; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). For example, couples who attend services together on a regular basis may be expressing their common commitment to faith and their relationship. It is also reasonable to expect that each partner may gain insight and inspiration, and may receive consistent, compatible feedback from coreligionists about relationship and family issues. Further, couples who attend services together are more likely than others to be subject to the social controls of coreligionist networks. Finally, religious attendance may simply be part of a longer list of religious practices by which partners strengthen their bonds through shared meaning systems and activities. Thus, couples who engage in regular devotional practices, such as family prayer or scriptural study within the home, may enjoy richer unions than others.

There are also sound reasons to consider the possible role of theological similarities or dissimilarities. The significance of denominational labels as markers of differences in values and lifestyles appears to be on the wane in recent decades (Wuthnow, 1988). Rates of interfaith marriage have been increasing for most nonconservative religious groups (Sherkat, 2004), and many denominations have become quite internally diverse, both theologically and attitudinally (Alwin, 1986; Gay, Ellison, & Powers, 1996). Consistent with this argument, one recent study suggested that the link between denominational homogamy and marital satisfaction has waned across generations (Myers, 2006). In contrast, empirical studies continue to reveal strong associations between theological beliefs (e.g., beliefs about scriptural interpretation) and a wide range of family-related attitudes and practices (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999). Indeed, core tenets may be more closely connected to lifestyles and behavioral choices than either denominational identities or self-reported religious attendance patterns. In data from the National Survey of Families and Households, the degree of spouses' theological dissimilarity is significantly associated with the risk of domestic violence (Ellison,

Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999), the frequency and type of arguments among partners (Curtis & Ellison, 2002), and the degree of satisfaction with the marriage (Heaton & Pratt, 1990). By contrast, couples who share core religious beliefs are probably more likely to hold similar family and gender attitudes and to agree more about the choices they confront in their relationship and family life.

Race and Ethnicity, Religion, and Relationships

To date, researchers have largely ignored possible racial and ethnic differences in the links between religious homogamy and dissimilarity or similarity and relationship quality. This is an oversight, not only because of racial and ethnic variations in marital and relationship quality and duration but also because patterns of religious affiliation, practice, and belief differ across racial and ethnic lines. This oversight is particularly noteworthy because of what might be called the African American religion – marriage paradox, where Blacks combine comparatively high levels of religiosity with comparatively low levels of marriage, marital quality, and relationship stability (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007).

The literature on African American religion indicates that Blacks exhibit significantly higher levels of religious attendance and congregational involvement, as well as nonorganizational religious practices and doctrinal conservatism (e.g., beliefs in the inerrancy and centrality of the Bible), than do non-Hispanic Whites from similar backgrounds (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). African American religiosity may be linked to higher quality relationships. African American congregations and clergy exhibit broad concern and involvement with the lives of church members and their families, and they often play leading roles in identifying and responding to community needs (Billingsley, 1999). In many urban communities, religious congregations are crucial in sustaining traditional norms of nuclear family life and personal deportment in the face of alternative cultures and norms of ''the street''; indeed, religion seems to be particularly important in protecting Black men from the lure of the street (Anderson, 1999; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Numerous studies underscore the importance of organizational and nonorganizational religious resources for African Americans coping with major crises and chronic stressors, including family and relationship problems (Taylor et al., 2004). These studies would suggest that religiosity, and religious homogamy in particular, fosters higher-quality relationships among Blacks; indeed, religion may be particularly valuable for African Americans insofar as it helps buffer against the stresses of poverty, neighborhood disorder, under- or unemployment, and discrimination that they face at markedly higher levels than do non-Hispanic Whites (Wilson, 1996). If religion fosters higher quality relationships, this suggest two possibilities: (a) suppressor patterns, in which statistical controls for variations in religiousness will increase the estimated net deficit in relationship quality for African Americans relative to non-Hispanic Whites, and (b) statistical interactions of religiousness and race and ethnicity (i.e., differences in slope coefficients), in which each unit of religiousness will yield greater dividends in relationship quality for African Americans than for non-Hispanic Whites.

The body of empirical work on religion and African American relationships is surprisingly modest. In a study of working White and Black married women, Furdyna, Tucker, and James (2008) found that Black women who rated themselves as more religious reported higher levels of marital happiness. A study of Michigan couples found that wives' attendance of religious services was linked to lower divorce rates for both non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks, but the effect was stronger for non-Hispanic Whites (Brown, Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008). In contrast, another study found that the protective effects of religious attendance on domestic violence were stronger for African Americans than for others (Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson, & Johnson, 2007). Although there is some evidence that religious involvement is positively associated with overall family satisfaction and closeness among African Americans (Ellison, 1997), no research has investigated the links between multiple aspects of religiousness and of a range of religious indicators on Blacks' relationship quality or specifically examined the effect of religious homogamy on relationship quality among African Americans. This is the case despite (a) the combination of high religiousness and relatively low rates of relationship quality among African Americans and (b) the fact that stable African American couples who are interviewed about such issues spontaneously

mention religious faith (Carolan & Allen, 1999; Marks et al., 2008).

Even less is known about the links between religion and family life in general, or intimate relationships in particular, among Hispanics. With regard to religious tradition, a recent study found that 70% of Hispanics are Catholic and 23% are Protestant (Espinosa, Elizondo, & Miranda, 2003). Both traditions lend normative and social support to a long-standing tradition of familism found in many Hispanic cultures (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). Familism is essentially the idea that one's family should be accorded a high priority, both subjectively and practically, and it is common among Hispanics, especially foreign-born Hispanics (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Both traditions also combat the excesses of a machismo ethic among some Hispanic men that has been linked to higher levels of domestic violence, infidelity, and alcohol abuse (Frias & Angel, 2005; McLoyd et al., 2000). Similarly, religion can be helpful in protecting Hispanics, especially Hispanic men, from assimilating downward to a code of ''the street''—marked by work in the underground economy, drug use, infidelity, and a violent way of life—which is found in many low-income communities and is not conducive to high-quality relationships (Anderson, 1999; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Finally, we also expect that the social support and subjective meaning provided by religious attendance and beliefs may be more valuable for Hispanic relationships than for White relationships because—somewhat as with Blacks—Hispanics are more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to be buffeted by the stresses of poverty, discrimination, acculturation, and neighborhood disorder (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Telles & Ortiz, 2008). But no research has specifically examined the links between religion and relationship quality among Hispanics. We hypothesize that religion will be particularly valuable to Hispanics, given the range of structural and cultural challenges facing Latinos in the United States. This may be particularly true for Hispanic couples who enjoy religious homogamy, in part because less religious Latino men may be more likely to embrace a macho identity that is not conducive to a high-quality relationship.

Method

Data

Our data come from the National Survey of Religion and Family Life (NSRFL), a 2006 telephone survey of working-age adults (ages 18 – 59) in the continental United States, conducted by SRBI, a New York – based survey firm. The NSRFL contains extensive data on the religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices of individual respondents and (where applicable) their partners, as well as detailed information on relationship characteristics and quality. On average, the survey took 30 min to complete. If respondents desired, the survey was conducted in Spanish.

Sampling Procedures and Characteristics

Households were selected to participate in the survey using random-digit dialing (RDD) techniques, and one respondent was chosen at random from each household. African Americans and Hispanics were oversampled by dialing into area codes containing at least 10% concentrations of those racial and ethnic subgroups. Notification letters, refusal conversion letters, and noncontact letters were mailed to all sampled households for which addresses were available.

The overall cooperation rate (the proportion of all cases interviewed of all eligible units ever contacted) was 54%, with greater cooperation rates in the racial and ethnic oversamples. The response rate (the number of complete interviews with reporting units divided by the number of eligible reporting units in the sample) for the NSRFL was 36% (33% in the cross-sectional sample, and 41% and 34% in the African American and Hispanic oversamples, respectively). Although the response rate is low by traditional standards, it compares favorably with most recent national RDD-based studies (Council on Market and Opinion Research [CMOR] 2003). Moreover, studies show few differences between government surveys with high response rates (e.g., the Current Population Survey) and RDD-based surveys with lower response rates (Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, & Presser, 2000; Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2004).

The full sample contains roughly equal numbers of African Americans, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic Whites. Because our analytic sample is limited to those who are currently in a relationship, it contains a smaller percentage of

Table 1. *Unadjusted Means by Race and Ethnicity on Key Variables*

	Total Sample ($N = 1{,}387$)	SD	Non-Hispanic White ($n = 539$)	African American ($n = 352$)	Mexican/Mexican American ($n = 348$)	Other Hispanic ($n = 148$)
Dependent variable						
Relationship satisfaction	4.80	0.98	4.88[b]	4.70[a]	4.80	4.75
Religion variables						
Respondent and partner attend regularly	0.32	—	0.29[b]	0.40[acd]	0.31[b]	0.23[b]
Respondent attends regularly; partner does not	0.10	—	0.07[b]	0.17[acd]	0.08[b]	0.11[b]
Partner attends regularly; respondent does not	0.06	—	0.04[b]	0.09[a]	0.07	0.07
Partners share affiliation	0.78	—	0.76[c]	0.73[c]	0.86[ab]	0.79
Partners share similar beliefs	3.45	0.88	3.45	3.42	3.49	3.43
Family religious activities	3.34	2.04	3.05[b]	4.10[acd]	3.16[b]	3.03[b]
Sociodemographics/controls						
Cohabitating	0.11	—	0.07[bcd]	0.12[ad]	0.13[ad]	0.20[abc]
Married	0.89	—	0.93[bcd]	0.88[ad]	0.87[ad]	0.80[abc]
Male	0.37	—	0.43[cd]	0.37	0.30[a]	0.32[a]
Employed full-time	0.63	—	0.69[c]	0.66[c]	0.52[ab]	0.60
Age	41.47	10.27	43.85[bcd]	42.28[ac]	37.22[abd]	40.84[ac]
Education	4.47	1.75	5.10[bcd]	4.64[acd]	3.43[abd]	4.25[abc]
Educational similarity	0.46	—	0.48[b]	0.39[ac]	0.51[b]	0.42
Income	4.84	2.15	5.81[bcd]	4.65[ac]	3.69[abd]	4.47[ac]
Partner employed full-time	0.73	—	0.72	0.77	0.71	0.74
Number of children	1.35	1.35	1.07[bc]	1.31[ac]	1.88[abd]	1.21[c]

[a]Indicates significant differences from non-Hispanic Whites ($a = p < .05$). [b]Indicates significant differences from African Americans ($b = p < .05$). [c]Indicates significant differences from Mexican Americans ($c = p < .05$). [d]Indicates significant differences from other Hispanics ($d = p < .05$).

African Americans (25%). Table 1 indicates that the overwhelming majority of respondents were married (89%); however, this number is lower among those respondents who are members of racial and ethnic minorities. Conversely, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and other Hispanics were all more likely to be in cohabitating relationships than their non-Hispanic White counterparts. Most respondents were women (63%), employed full-time (63%), and had children (an average of 1.35 children). The average number of children was greater for African Americans and Mexican Americans than for non-Hispanic Whites. The average respondent was approximately 41 years of age, with at least some education beyond college. Finally, racial and ethnic minorities tended to report lower levels of education and income than their non-Hispanic White counterparts.

Dependent Variable: Relationship Satisfaction

We measured relationship satisfaction by mean responses to two questions: ''Taking all things considered, how would you describe your relationship?'' and ''How happy are you with the love and affection you receive from your partner?'' Responses for both items range from *very unhappy* (1) to *extremely happy* (6) ($r = 0.77$).

Key Independent Variables: Religious Involvement

We measure several distinct aspects of religious involvement. First, we include a measure of organizational religious involvement: frequency of church attendance. The frequency of attendance at religious services is gauged via the following item: ''How often do you attend religious services?'' In addition, the respondent

was asked how often his or her partner attended religious services. Responses for both of these items range from *never* (1) to *more than once a week* (6). The two items were used to construct three dummy variables capturing whether the respondent and partner attended regularly (i.e. once a week or more), the respondent attends regularly but the partner does not, or the partner attends regularly but the respondent does not. Those couples not regularly attending services served as the reference category for our analysis.

Respondents were also asked their own religious affiliation as well as the religious affiliation of their partner. These items were used to construct a dummy variable for whether partners share the same religious affiliation. Those partners not sharing a religious affiliation served as the reference category for our analysis.

Similarly, respondents were asked about the degree of dissimilarity or similarity between their own religious beliefs and those of those of their partner. Shared religious values were gauged via responses to the question, ''Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statement: You feel that your partner shares your core religious or spiritual values.'' Responses to this item capturing whether partners share similar beliefs ranged from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (5).

Finally, respondents were asked how often they prayed or participated in other religious activities with their partner or children at home, excluding grace at meals. Responses for this item measuring family religious activities ranged from *never* (1) to *more than once a week* (6).

Background Factors

Previous research establishes a number of individual-level sociodemographic characteristics as correlates or predictors of relationship satisfaction (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). We can be confident of our conclusions regarding possible religious variations in relationship satisfaction only if we include statistical adjustments for the potentially confounding factors. Therefore, our models include controls for the following variables: race and/or ethnicity (dummy variables for African American, Mexican American, and other Hispanic, with non-Hispanic White as the reference category); relationship status (a dichotomous variable coded 1 = *married*, with *cohabitating* as the reference category); gender (a dichotomous variable coded 1 = *male*); employment status (a dichotomous variable coded 1 = *employed full-time*, with other work status as the reference category); age (dummy variables for *age 26–33*, *age 34–41*, *age 42–49*, and *50 and older*, with 25 and younger as the reference category); *education* (dummy variables for *less than high school, some college, bachelor's degree*, and *graduate degree*, with high school as the reference category); educational similarly (a dichotomous variable coded 1 = *respondent and partner have the same level of education*, with otherwise educationally matched as the reference category); income (eight categories ranging from less than $15,000 to more than $100,000); partner's employment status (a dichotomous variable coded 1 = *partner employed full-time*, with other employment status as the reference category); number of children (actual number); ages of children in the household (dummy variables for children *under 6 years in the household* and children *between 6 and 11 in the household*, with children *over 11 in the household* as the reference category).

Statistical Procedures

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables used in these analyses for the total sample as well as comparisons by race or ethnicity ($N = 1{,}387$). Table 2 presents a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models estimating the net effects of religious variables and covariates on relationship satisfaction ($N = 1{,}381$). Models are organized as follows: Model 1 (the baseline model) includes nonreligious predictors, such as sociodemographic factors and other key variables. Model 2 adds a series of dummy variables to capture frequency of church attendance. Model 3 replaces church attendance with a measure of whether the respondent and his or her partner share a religious affiliation. Model 4 includes a measure of whether the respondent and his or her partner share similar core religious or spiritual beliefs. Model 5 includes a measure of whether the respondent participates in home religious activities with his or her family. The final model, Model 6, includes all of our religion measures simultaneously.

RESULTS

Unadjusted Means by Race or Ethnicity

On average, NSRFL respondents reported high levels of relationship satisfaction (4.80 on

Table 2. *Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Relationship Satisfaction on Religious Involvement and Background Factors (*N = *1,381)*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	b	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Respondent and partner attend regularly			0.30	0.06***							−0.00	0.06
Respondent attends regularly; partner does not			−0.16	0.09							−0.18	0.09*
Partner attends regularly; respondent does not			0.07	0.10							−0.09	0.10
Partners share affiliation					0.24	0.06***					−0.05	0.06
Partners share similar beliefs							0.30	0.03***			0.26	0.03***
Family religious activities									0.11	0.01***	0.09	0.01***
African American	−0.11	0.07	−0.13	0.07	−0.11	0.07	−0.12	0.06	−0.21	0.07**	−0.18	0.07**
Mexican American	−0.08	0.07	−0.11	0.07	−0.10	0.07	−0.11	0.07	−0.09	0.07	−0.10	0.07
Other Hispanic	−0.12	0.09	−0.11	0.09	−0.13	0.09	−0.12	0.09	−0.13	0.09	−0.12	0.08
Married	0.29	0.08***	0.24	0.08**	0.26	0.08***	0.25	0.07***	0.21	0.07**	0.20	0.07**
Male	0.11	0.06	0.09	0.06	0.11	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.12	0.06*	0.07	0.06
Employed full-time	0.10	0.06	0.11	0.06	0.09	0.06	0.11	0.06	0.11	0.06	0.12	0.06*
Age 26–33	−0.03	0.11	−0.07	0.10	−0.04	0.11	−0.04	0.10	−0.01	0.10	−0.03	0.10
Age 34–41	−0.23	0.11*	−0.27	0.11*	−0.24	0.11*	−0.19	0.10	−0.22	0.11*	−0.18	0.10
Age 42–49	−0.11	0.11	−0.15	0.11	−0.12	0.11	−0.09	0.10	−0.13	0.10	−0.10	0.10
Age 50 and older	−0.26	0.11*	−0.31	0.11**	−0.26	0.11*	−0.24	0.11*	−0.27	0.11*	−0.23	0.11*
Less than high school	0.20	0.08*	0.19	0.08*	0.18	0.08*	0.20	0.08*	0.17	0.08*	0.18	0.08*
Some college	−0.11	0.07	−0.12	0.07	−0.09	0.07	−0.12	0.07	−0.14	0.07*	−0.15	0.07*
Bachelor's degree	−0.00	0.08	−0.04	0.08	−0.00	0.08	−0.05	0.08	−0.04	0.08	−0.07	0.08
Graduate degree	0.02	0.10	−0.02	0.10	0.03	0.10	−0.00	0.10	−0.03	0.10	−0.04	0.10
Educational similarity	0.02	0.05	0.01	0.05	0.02	0.05	−0.00	0.05	0.01	0.05	−0.01	0.05
Income	0.04	0.02*	0.04	0.02*	0.04	0.02*	0.04	0.02**	0.04	0.02**	0.04	0.02**
Partner employed full-time	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.03	0.06	0.00	0.06	0.02	0.06	−0.00	0.06
Number of children	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.02*	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.02
Children under six in the household	0.13	0.08	0.13	0.07	0.12	0.08	0.15	0.07*	0.10	0.07	0.12	0.07
Children between 6 and 11 in the household	0.03	0.09	0.04	0.09	0.03	0.09	0.02	0.08	−0.00	0.09	0.01	0.08
Constant	4.31		4.34		4.18		3.37		4.11		3.38	
Model *F*	3.38***		4.47***		3.97***		9.09***		7.15***		9.64***	
R^2	0.04		0.07		0.06		0.12		0.10		0.16	

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

a 6-point scale); however, African American respondents reported being significantly less happy in their partnerships than non-Hispanic Whites. In contrast, African American respondents reported significantly higher levels of church attendance, both with and without their partners, in comparison to non-Hispanic White respondents. Whereas approximately 29% of non-Hispanic White respondents attended religious services regularly and are partnered with someone who attended services on a regular basis, almost 40% of African American respondents fit this description. African American respondents were also significantly more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to have partners who regularly attended religious services, even when they themselves did not attend services. Of the total sample, approximately 78% of couples shared a religious affiliation; however, roughly 86% of Mexican American couples shared an affiliation, a significantly greater percentage than among non-Hispanic White couples. Finally, African Americans were significantly more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to participate in family religious activities.

Main Effects

Table 2 displays the results of OLS regression models. To conserve space, we confine our discussion to findings involving religious and racial and ethnic variables, which are central to our study. Several important patterns involving couples' religious involvement and relationship quality emerged from the analyses. First, according to Model 2, satisfaction with the relationship tended to be higher among couples who attend services regularly ($b = .30$, $p < .001$). However, when other religious dimensions were controlled in Model 6, this pattern disappeared. Second, although religious homogamy (i.e., shared religious affiliation) was positively associated with relationship quality in Model 3 ($b = .24$, $p < .001$), the association was also eliminated by controls for the other religious variables. Third, the degree to which core religious and spiritual values are shared among partners was positively linked with relationship satisfaction in Model 4 ($b = .30$, $p < .001$); in contrast to the estimated effects of shared affiliation and attendance, this association persisted even in the full model ($b = .26$, $p < .001$). Finally, the frequency with which couples practice in-home devotional activities, such as prayer or scriptural study, was also linked with relationship quality ($b = .11$, $p < .001$). Despite the inclusion of controls for other aspects of couples' religiousness, such in-home worship activities remained positively associated with satisfaction in Model 6 ($b = .09$, $p < .001$).

Table 2 also sheds new light on the complex interplay of race, ethnicity, and couples' religiousness in shaping relationship quality. Although the baseline model (Model 1) revealed no significant net racial or ethnic differences in relationship satisfaction, subsequent models showed that the true magnitude of racial and ethnic gaps in this outcome is masked, or suppressed, by the comparatively high levels of religiousness among African American and, to a lesser extent, Latino couples. A sizable gap in relationship satisfaction between African Americans and non-Hispanic Whites existed in the full model ($b = -.18$, $p < .01$). Taken together, the findings indicate that racial and ethnic differences in relationship quality would be even greater than they are if not for the higher average levels of religiousness among African American and Hispanic couples.

In addition to the analyses presented in Table 2, we also estimated several sets of ancillary models (not shown but available on request). First, we explored the possibility that the links between couples' religiousness varies by race and ethnicity by adding cross-product interaction terms (Race and ethnicity × Religious variables) to Model 6 in Table 2. However, no clear or consistent pattern of such interactions surfaced in these models. We interpret the null effects as evidence that the subgroups examined here differ in levels, but not effects, of couples' religiousness. Second, we also examined several potential explanations for the religious patterns observed in Table 2. Specifically, we added controls for the following variables to Model 6: (a) the self-rated spirituality and religiousness of the respondent, (b) the degree of guidance the respondent received from his or her religious faith, and (c) the extent to which the respondent perceived the religious congregation (if any) to be a potential source of social support when needed. Ultimately, however, the variables did not account for the estimated net effects reported herein, and they did not significantly improve the predictive power of the model. Third, given that our data were collected from only one of the relationship partners, we added Gender × Religion interactions to gauge whether the role of religiousness

was more pronounced for women than for men. The null findings indicate otherwise.

Discussion

Some academics and policymakers have expressed concern about the shifting fortunes of marriage in the contemporary United States. This has led to a growing body of research on patterns and determinants of relationship quality. In addition, investigators have shown a long-standing interest in the role of religion as a source of validation and support for marriage, and for traditional nuclear family arrangements more generally, although some recent findings suggest that the link between religion and marriage may be waning or at least changing. Scholars have also pointed to an intriguing paradox: Religious belief and practice tend to be higher among members of racial and ethnic minority populations, for whom relationship quality is also more elusive. This raises an important set of questions regarding the interplay of race and ethnicity and multiple dimensions of couples' religiousness in shaping variations in relationship quality. We have explored these issues using data from a nationwide sample of working-age adults (ages 18 – 59) that includes oversamples of African Americans and Hispanic (Latino) Americans.

Several patterns involving couples' religious affiliation and practices are especially noteworthy. Consistent with a number of previous studies, persons in homogamous (i.e., same-faith) relationships and those in which both partners attend religious services regularly tended to report greater relationship satisfaction than do others. In addition, the frequency with which couples engage in regular in-home worship activities (e.g., prayer, scriptural study) was also positive linked with relationship quality. Although controls for other dimensions of religiousness attenuated or mediated the net effects of couples' institutional religious engagement, the net effect of in-home devotional activities persisted even in the full model. On the one hand, the findings are broadly consistent with the popular aphorism that ''couples who pray together stay together.'' On the other hand, they also raise interesting questions about (a) how religious communities and the social relationships within them may nurture and sustain the quality of intimate bonds, and (b) whether more religiously devoted couples may differ from their counterparts on other, unmeasured variables that may also be linked with relationship quality (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Our results also dovetail with recent studies that conclude that religious homogamy is a weaker predictor of relationship quality than it once was (Myers, 2006), perhaps because denominational labels have become less meaningful as markers of theological, attitudinal, or lifestyle differences over the past several decades, as more individualistic expressions of faith and spiritual seeking have gained popularity.

Another major finding is that couples in which partners share core religious beliefs and values tended to report greater satisfaction than others. Indeed, such subjective and nonorganizational indicators of couples' religiousness appear to be even more predictive of relationship quality than shared affiliation or attendance. This pattern is broadly consistent with the findings of other religion – family studies, which tend to show that core religious beliefs, especially indicators of Evangelicalism, such as beliefs about the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, are more predictive of family-related attitudes and practices (e.g., childrearing and child discipline, division of household labor) than is affiliation or practice (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002; Wilcox, 1998). Further, the degree of partners' dissimilarity in such beliefs also predicts frequency and types of conflict and exacerbates the risk of marital dissolution (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999; Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009).

Our study also reveals the interplay of race and ethnicity and religion in shaping relationship quality. In particular, our results demonstrate a substantial racial and ethnic gap in relationship quality, the full magnitude of which is suppressed by the comparatively high levels of multiple dimensions of religiousness among African American and Latino respondents. We found no evidence of statistical interactions between religiousness and race and ethnicity (i.e., differences in religion slope coefficients across racial and ethnic groups). Taken together, the findings provide an important window to the crucial role of religious faith for minority couples. We speculate that this pattern may partly reflect the chasm between ''decent'' and ''street'' cultures that are thought to characterize some African American and Latino communities (Anderson, 1999). This possibility is particularly plausible in light of other recent research showing that couples who attend church together in urban America

are significantly less likely than others to use drugs, to have conflicts over sexual infidelity, or to experience domestic violence (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). By contrast, rates of domestic violence are markedly elevated among African American men who rarely or never attend religious services (Ellison et al., 2007).

Future research could clarify and extend these findings. It would be useful to identify and distinguish among the various explanations for observed religious variations in relationship quality. On the one hand, partners who share common values may engage in more positive emotion work (e.g., supportive exchanges, companionship, compliments, routine acts of kindness) and less negative emotion work (e.g., criticism, demands). They may also employ more constructive strategies for communicating, compromising, and resolving disagreements. Religious differentials in other relationship-related behaviors (e.g., infidelity, domestic violence, drug or alcohol use, gambling and other risky or impulsive behaviors) may also help to explain these patterns. In addition, personal or subjective religiousness has been linked with commitment to family roles and willingness to sacrifice one's self-interest in favor of the needs or desires of one's partner (Mahoney et al., 2001). Clearly future research should specify the mechanisms that connect couples' religiousness with relationship quality.

Several limitations of this study should also be acknowledged. First, the data are cross-sectional, which precludes the establishment of causal order among variables. For example, it is not possible to establish whether high-quality relationships promote religiousness, or vice versa, or to rule out the possibility that pro-religious and pro-relationship values are rooted in dispositional factors (e.g., impulse control, conscientiousness) or other variables that cannot be measured here. Second, our survey relies on the survey responses of one partner to report on couples' religiousness and relationship quality. It would be helpful to have independent responses from both individuals and their spouses or partners, as well as observational data on interaction and conflict resolution styles. This would enhance confidence that sources of bias related to the method of data collection did not influence our findings. Third, although the large minority oversamples are a major strength of this survey, our data are also characterized by rather low response rates, and for that reason, too, it would be useful for future investigators to replicate the findings using data gathered via other methods. Fourth, our analysis focuses on heterosexual couples. Although there is emerging evidence that religiousness may also foster relationship commitment among same-sex couples (Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Clausell, 2008), research on the links with relationship quality in that population remains in its early stages, and more investigation is needed concerning possible racial and ethnic variations in such associations.

Despite these limitations, our study has made an original contribution to the research literature by examining the interplay of race and ethnicity, multiple aspects of couples' religiousness, and relationship quality. Results indicate that the linkages are more complex than previous studies have recognized. Although religious factors bear a nontrivial association with the relationship quality of non-Hispanic White couples, our findings confirm and augment a broader literature showing that religion can be especially important within racial and ethnic minority populations, for whom religious resources and worldviews can counter the effects of structural barriers and other obstacles to relationship quality. Further investigation along the lines sketched here is needed to clarify the mechanisms via which religious factors contribute to relationship quality in the increasingly diverse American society of the 21st century.

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Appendix A. *Bivariate Correlations Among Relationship Satisfaction and Religion Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Relationship satisfaction	—						
2. Respondent and partner attend regularly	.14***	—					
3. Respondent attends regularly; partner does not	−.15***	−.23***	—				
4. Partner attends regularly; respondent does not	.01	−.17***	−.09**	—			
5. Partners share affiliation	.37***	.28***	−.21***	−0.03	—		
6. Partners share similar beliefs	.28***	.26***	−.15***	0.01	.37***	—	
7. Family religious activities	.20***	.41***	.04	0.04	.17***	.20***	—

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