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Perceived Admiration and Transition to Parenthood for Black and White Married Couples

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Abstract

Perceived admiration was examined in this study as a mediator of marital quality and transition to parenthood among Black American and White American couples. Both positive and negative dimensions of marital quality were assessed for husbands ($N = 148$) and wives ($N = 155$) during their first and third years of marriage in a large-scale survey. Findings revealed that transitioning Black American husbands reported lower marital tension than transitioning White American husbands. Perceived admiration mediated the link between transition to parenthood and marital wellbeing for wives, and between transition to parenthood and marital tension for husbands. Results suggest that perceived admiration plays a critical role in understanding the transition to parenthood, regardless of race. Insights are offered for practitioners who provide relationship or parental counseling and education to couples during the transition to parenthood.

Keywords

transition to parenthood; race; gender; marital quality; marital virtues

The transition to parenthood marks an important developmental milestone for couples (McGoldrick, 2005), who experience an increase in their identity as parents, a decrease as partners and lovers (Cowan, Cowan, & Heming et al., 1985), and a decrease in emotional intimacy (Cowan et al., 1985; MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990). Moreover, nearly 90% of couples will experience this transition at some time during their marriage (Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005). For decades, social scientists have examined marital quality in the context of couples making the transition to parenthood (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; McHale & Huston, 1985; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). Several studies, including a meta-analysis comparing the marital quality of both parents and childless couples (Twenge

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et al., 2003), have found that marital quality is significantly lower after the transition to parenthood (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Mitnick, Heyman & Slep, 2009; Lawrence, Rotham, Cobb, Rotham, & Bradbury, 2008). This finding has persisted across many studies over several decades (Glenn & McLanahan, 1982; Lawrence et al., 2008; Levy-Shiff, 1994; Twenge et al., 2003).

Despite the common finding that marital quality decreases after the birth of a child, other studies show that it is the context of this transition to parenthood, rather than the transition itself, that impacts marital quality. Difficulties with the division of household labor/child care (Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Terry et al., 1991), higher stress levels of couples (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Gallant, 2000; Klinnert, Gavin, Wamboldt, & Mrazek 1992), depression symptoms of spouses (Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Salmela-Aro, Aunola, Halmesmäki, & Nurmi, 2006), and specific types of couple conflict (Crohan, 1996; Houts, Barnett-Walker, Paley, & Cox, 2008) are examples of phenomena associated with lower marital quality during this transition. This research suggests that a decrease in marital quality results from changes that occur as a result of parenthood (e.g., division of household labor) or from phenomena impacting marital quality that become more pronounced (e.g., depression symptoms of spouses) during this developmental milestone.

In spite of these changes resulting from being a parent, still other studies indicate that some couples report high marital quality during the transition to parenthood (Feeney, Hohaus, Noller, & Alexander, 2001; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrère, 2000). Belsky and Rovine (1990) found that over 50% of couples in their study demonstrated either no change or a modest positive increase in relationship quality across a three-year assessment period. The researchers concluded that additional research is needed to identify the nuances associated with marital change and stability during the transition to parenthood. The purpose of the current study is to examine how perceived admiration contributes to understanding of marital quality during the transition to parenthood. In addition, given the little research on the transition to parenthood among Black American married couples, the transition was examined in the context of both race and gender.

Marital Friendship and Positive Communication

Two significant factors that predict stable or higher marital quality during the transition to parenthood include positive communication (Cox et al., 1999; Houts et al., 2008) and marital friendship (Shapiro et al., 2000). Cox et al., (1999) found that when either the husband or wife was observed to exhibit positive problem-solving communication prior to the birth of the child, couples reported more satisfaction with their marriage after the child's birth. Similarly, Houts et al. (2008) showed that both husbands and wives who were observed to disagree constructively reported significantly more positive views and fewer negative views of marriage than husbands and wives who were observed to disagree destructively. Shapiro et al. (2000), using codes from oral history interviews, found that marital quality remained stable or increased for women during the transition to parenthood when husbands expressed fondness, pride or affection toward them and when each spouse was highly aware of the partner (e.g. showed awareness of relationship history and the "spouse's world;" p. 63). Shapiro et al. (2000) refer to this phenomenon as *marital*

friendship and note that the husband's marital friendship was the strongest predictor of changes in the wife's marital satisfaction after the transition to parenthood.

The themes of marital friendship and positive communication suggest that spouses' concern for the wellbeing of their partners is integrally linked to the health and stability of the marriage. Moreover, the concepts of positive affect and fondness allude to the importance of spouses showing admiration toward their partners for sustaining marital health and wellbeing. Encapsulating these ideas is the marital virtue of admiration, as proposed in marital virtues theory (Fowers, 2000).

Marital Virtues Theory and Perceived Partner Responsiveness

According to the marital virtues perspective, spouses understand that their own wellbeing is deeply dependent on relationship wellbeing (Fowers, 2000). Fowers (2005) argues that virtues are “character strengths that make it possible for people to pursue uniquely human aims or goods successfully” (p. 29). Several virtues, according to marital virtues theory, are considered important for marital health, including justice, generosity, and admiration (Fowers, 2000; Hawkins, Fowers, Carroll, & Yang, 2007); the virtue of admiration bears conceptual similarity to *marital friendship* (Shapiro et al., 2000) mentioned above. According to Hawkins et al., admiration refers to how regularly the partner compliments the spouse, as well as the extent to which the partner recognizes the spouse's positive qualities and admires the spouse.

While admiration may be important for understanding marital quality during the transition to parenthood, it may also be crucial to understand spousal perceptions of the same. For example, studies on attachment during transition to parenthood indicate that wives' perception of emotional support from the husband may be just as important as actual support (Simpson & Rholes, 2002; Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, & Wilson, 2003). The importance of perception to marital quality is discussed in the theory *perceived partner responsiveness*, which holds that spouses are more satisfied when they perceive their partner as responsive or sense their innermost needs are being met by their partner (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). This idea has gained some empirical support. Specifically, Oggins, Veroff, and Leber (1993) found that the degree to which partners make their spouse feel valued, validated and important strongly predicted marital quality for wives and husbands, both White American and Black American.

While perceived partner responsiveness identifies the critical role of partners' perceptions as they relate to marital health, Reis and colleagues (2004) acknowledge it is a broad concept. To better understand how perceived partner responsiveness plays a role in marital quality, it is important to specify an aspect of this concept that can be captured empirically. It makes sense to consider the virtue of admiration as a specific manifestation of perceived partner responsiveness, as it closely resembles marital friendship, described above as an important predictor of marital quality during transition to parenthood (Shapiro et al., 2000). Consequently, combining the concept of admiration from marital virtues theory with perceived partner responsiveness may provide an important organizing framework for

predicting marital quality during the transition to parenthood, referred to herein as *perceived admiration*.

Despite literature already linking marital friendship (Shapiro et al., 2000), and positive communication (Cox et al., 1999; Houts et al., 2008) to marital quality during the transition to parenthood, no study to date has addressed how a similar concept (i.e., perceived admiration), may predict marital quality during the transition among a representative sample of both White American and Black American couples. Moreover, none of these studies investigated how perception of marital friendship or positive communication potentially served as a mechanism by which marital quality declines during transition to parenthood. Perceived admiration may be an underlying mechanism in the link between transitioning to parenthood and marital quality; transitioning to parenthood may reduce a spouse's perceptions of a partner's admiration resulting in lower marital quality.

The Context of Race and Gender

The need for research on marital quality among Black American couples transitioning to parenthood is particularly important. The only study that has investigated this transition among both Black American and White American couples (Crohan, 1996) found racial differences for both husbands and wives. Crohan (1996) discovered that marital tension increased for White American transitioning wives and husbands between year one and year three of marriage. However, only Black American transitioning wives reported an increase in marital tension between year one and year three, not Black American transitioning husbands. This finding highlights the importance of understanding differences that emerge in couples' experiences by race and gender. Moving beyond Crohan's study, it is important to examine whether couples' perceived partner responsiveness is an underlying mechanism that mediates the change.

Despite limited research on Black American couples, some literature suggests Black American couples have unique cultural family strengths that are often overlooked. For example, Orbuch and Eyster (1997) found that, compared to White American couples, Black American couples were more egalitarian in their attitudes and behaviors regarding gendered roles in the family. They also revealed that these egalitarian attitudes and behaviors positively predicted marital stability for Black American, but not White American couples (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997; Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). Other scholars similarly note that flexibility in family roles is a unique strength of Black American families (Hill, 2003; Johnson & Staples, 2005). This flexibility or egalitarianism in family roles also may be vital to the transition to parenthood because the transition is characterized by role changes, including the division of household labor, and spouses defining themselves more as parents and less as partners (Cowan, et al., 1985). If Black American couples are more flexible and egalitarian, transitioning to parenthood may not present the same challenges for them as White American couples, suggesting changes in marital quality may not be as pronounced for Black American couples compared to White American couples.

The current study had three primary goals, the first of which was to examine whether the transition to parenthood was associated with a change in marital quality from years 1 – 3 for

wives and husbands. It was predicted that wives and husbands transitioning to parenthood would experience a stronger decline in marital quality than wives and husbands not transitioning to parenthood. Moreover, because marital and life changes are more pronounced for women versus men (Harriman, 1983; Twenge et al., 2003), the decision was made to investigate marital quality separately for women and men.

The second goal was to determine whether differences existed in marital quality between Black American and White American couples experiencing the transition to parenthood. Given the literature, the hypothesis was that Black American wives and husbands who transitioned to parenthood would report higher marital quality than White American wives and husbands, specifically higher marital wellbeing and lower marital tension.

The third goal of the study was to determine if perceived partner admiration accounted for the change in marital quality during the transition to parenthood. It was proposed that perceived partner admiration would mediate the relationship between the transition to parenthood and marital quality.

Method

Sample and Procedures

This study analyzed data from the Early Years of Marriage (EYM) project, which was developed to investigate social psychological processes in marital relationships. The original EYM study (i.e., beginning in 1986, Year 1) consisted of 174 White American and 199 Black American couples, all who applied for marriage licenses during a 3-month period in 1986 in Wayne County, Michigan ($N = 373$ couples; See Orbach & Veroff, 2002). For couples to be included in the EYM study, the marriage had to be intraracial, the first marriage for both partners, and the wife had to be 35 years old or younger. White couples were randomly selected, and all available Black couples were recruited. Sixty-five percent of the couples who were recruited participated, a reasonably good response rate, given that both spouses had to agree to participate.

Respondents were asked an extensive battery of questions about themselves, their spouses, and their marriages. A race-matched interviewer met face-to-face with wives and husbands together and separately in the first (1986), third (1988), seventh (1993), and sixteenth (2002) years of marriage (see Orbach, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002 for more information on the procedures).

In Year 1 of the study, husbands' mean age was 26.48 years; for wives, it was 24.31. The average educational level was 13.11 for husbands and 13.13 for wives. In order to compare this sample with national statistics, we used the General Social Survey (GSS) data from 1980 – 1994. This particular sample corresponds to first married individuals by race on income, education, parental status, and a host of other demographic variables. The broadly representative makeup of the sample enhances the generalizability of the findings.

In the third year of the study, 14% of the original couples had divorced or separated (18% Black, 9% White), precluding the possibility of obtaining marital status information on 5%

of the couples (7% Black, 2% White). Very few of the couples refused to participate in the study. In the current study, data were analyzed from the first (1986, Year 1) and third years (1988, Year 3) of the EYM project.

Due to attrition and divorce, the sample in Year 3 was $N = 266$ couples. Out of the Year 3 sample, the following criteria were used for inclusion of couples in the current analyses. First, couples had to still be married in Year 3. Next, couples had to experience either the birth of their first child or remain childless between Year 1 and Year 3. Couples in which either the husband or wife had a child prior to Year 1 were excluded from analyses (referred to as *premarital parents*). Premarital parents were excluded from analyses in order to determine how the transition to parenthood affects marital quality for only first time parents. Also, the attrition rate for premarital parents was much higher than for those who remained childless prior to marriage (Timmer & Orbuch, 2001). Moreover, compared to the rest of the sample in Year 1, premarital parents “were significantly more likely to be Black, have dropped out of high school, and have a lower household income” (Timmer & Orbuch, 2001, p. 18.)

Another criterion for inclusion in the current analyses was the couple had to agree that they had a child between Year 1 and Year 3. Lastly, wives and husbands were required to have available data on all measures of central interest. Because wives and husbands were assessed separately in regression analyses, this allowed for some discrepancy in sample size between wives and husbands. The final sample for wives was $N=155$, including 54 *transitioning* wives (33 White, 21 Black) and 101 *nontransitioning* wives (70 White, 31 Black). The final sample for husbands was $N=148$, including 51 *transitioning* husbands (32 White, 19 Black) and 97 *nontransitioning* husbands (68 White, 29 Black).

Measures

Marital quality was conceptualized in this study as having both positive and negative evaluations (Crohan, 1996; Fincham, Beach, & Kemp-Fincham, 1997). Positive evaluations were referred to as *Marital Wellbeing*. Negative evaluations were referred to as *Marital Tension*. These two variables were conceptualized as separate, but distinct dimensions of marital quality. Factor analyses (not reported here) confirmed that this was an appropriate conceptualization. Correlation analyses for Year 3 marital wellbeing and Year 3 marital tension were $r(154) = -.36, p < .01$ and $r(147) = -.49, p < .01$ for wives and husbands, respectively. Correlation analyses for Y1 marital wellbeing and Y1 marital tension were $r(154) = -.30, p < .01$ and $r(147) = -.37, p < .01$ for wives and husbands, respectively. These significant correlations, showing inverse and moderately strong relationships, further suggest this conceptualization was appropriate.

Marital wellbeing—Marital wellbeing factors for Year 1 and Year 3 were computed by extracting a principal component of six items: “How would you describe your marriage (1 = *very happy*, 4 = *not too happy*)”, “When you think about your marriage—what each of you puts into it, and gets out of it—how happy do you feel? (1 = *very happy*, 4 = *not at all happy*)”, “How certain would you say you are that the two of you will be married five years from now? (1 = *very certain*, 4 = *not certain at all*)”, “How stable do you feel your marriage

is? (1 = *very stable*, 4 = *not stable at all*)”, “In the last few months, how often have you considered leaving your wife/husband? (1 = *never*, 4 = *often*)”, and “How satisfied are you with your marriage? (1 = *very satisfied*, 4 = *very dissatisfied*). Alpha coefficients for marital wellbeing in Year 1 were .73 for wives and .84 for husbands; and in Year 3 were .91 for wives and .88 for husbands. All items were constrained to one component and treated as factor scores. The total variance explained for wives and husbands was 70.1% and 64.1%, respectively. Factors were recoded, such that higher scores reflected greater marital wellbeing. This variable has construct validity and has been used in previous studies (Brown, Birditt, Huff, & Edwards, 2012; Timmer & Orbuch, 2001).

Marital tension—Marital tension factors for Year 1 and Year 3 were computed by extracting a principal component of four items, assessing how often in the past month (1 = *often*, 4 = *never*) spouses felt: (1) irritated or resentful about things their partner did or didn't do; (2) felt upset about how they were getting along with their partner in the sexual part of their relationship; (3) felt that their partner was upset about how the two of them were getting along in the sexual part of their relationship; and (4) felt tense from fighting, arguing or disagreeing with their partner. Alpha coefficients for marital tension in Year 1 were .74 for both wives and husbands; and in Year 3 were .73 for wives and .79 for husbands. All items were constrained to one component and treated as factor scores. Factors were recoded, such that higher scores reflected greater marital tension. Total variance explained for wives and husbands was 55.0% and 60.9%, respectively. Analyses using principal components analysis and principal factor analysis (not reported here) suggested two possible solutions, one of which was combining the four items. The decision was made to keep the solution combining the four items, given that it was used in a previous study on transition to parenthood using the same dataset (Crohan, 1996).

Transition to parenthood—Although the transition to parenthood can encapsulate many factors and changes, in this study the variable was assessed by asking respondents in both Year 2 and Year 3: “Since we last talked a year ago, have you and your husband had a baby?” Data were obtained separately for wives and husbands. Wives and husbands had to agree whether or not they birthed/fathered a baby to be classified as either transitioning to parenthood or not transitioning to parenthood. If the couple disagreed the data were labeled as *missing*. If the couple agreed on having a baby between Year 1 and Year 3, they were classified as *transitioning to parenthood* (coded 1). If the couple agreed that they did not have a baby between Year 1 and Year 3, they were classified as *nontransitioning* (coded 0).

Perceived admiration—Perceived admiration was computed from four items measuring spouses' perceptions of their partners' admiration. Items used to measure perceived admiration included items that have been demonstrated in past EYM studies to be strong predictors of marital commitment (Veroff, 1999) and marital wellbeing (Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002). However, this study excluded one item and added another that more accurately reflected the theoretical premise of perceived admiration. Perceived admiration assessed how often in the past month (1 = *often*, 4 = *never*) spouses felt their partners: (1) were especially caring toward them, (2) were someone they could count on in times of trouble, (3) made them feel good about having their own ideas and ways of doing

things, and (4) made them feel good about the kind of people they are. Alpha coefficients for perceived admiration in Year 3 were .71 for wives and .79 for husbands. All items were constrained to one component and treated as factor scores from the 4 items. Scores were recoded, such that higher scores reflected greater perceived admiration. Total variance explained for wives and husbands was 53.7% and 62.2%, respectively.

Race—Respondents were White (0) or Black (1). No other races were eligible for the EYM study.

Control variables—There were three control variables included in the multivariate analyses. *Education* was the highest grade of school or year of college that they had completed by Year 3, which was coded into the total number of years of schooling completed. *Age* was the respondent's age at the time of the Year 3 interview. For *Household income*, interviewers asked respondents to select from income categories for the entire household before taxes. Household income was then coded as the midpoint of the category selected. Responses were divided by 10,000 so that unstandardized survival parameter estimates would not round to zero.

Analysis Strategy

In preparation for the multivariate analyses, we explored the correlations across all study variables, including marital wellbeing in Year 1 and marital tension in Year 1. First, we checked for multicollinearity; all correlations were well below .70 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Second, we determined which control variables were at least marginally correlated ($p < .10$) with marital wellbeing and marital tension; these variables were kept for multivariate analyses, while variables that were not correlated at this level were deleted from the models. Using this procedure meant including different control variables for the multivariate analyses of husbands and wives, but it allowed us to obtain a clearer picture of the impact of the study variables. (Hierarchical regression analyses (described below) were also conducted with all control variables. These analyses showed that inclusion of only marginally correlated control variables was appropriate.) Third, scatterplots were analyzed, which indicated linear relationships between the variables. Lastly, centered all interval-level predictor and control variables were centered prior to the multivariate regression analyses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Respondents with complete data on the variables of central interest were compared in Year 1 and Year 3 (i.e., *race*, *age*, *education*, *income*, *transition to parenthood*, *marital wellbeing*, *marital tension*, and *perceived admiration*) to those with missing data on the same variables. (For wives, comparisons also were made on *employment status*.) No significant differences were found on any of these variables between respondents with complete data and those with missing data.

The three research goals were analyzed using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. Rather than estimating a couple's association between transition to parenthood and marital quality (i.e., dyadic analyses), these associations were examined separately for husbands and wives. This analytic decision was further supported by the presence of control variables specific to the husband or wife.

To test the mediation hypotheses, a series of multiple regression analyses were performed as recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, the path from the predictor variable (transition to parenthood) was estimated and tested to the outcome variable (marital wellbeing or tension) to determine if there was a significant relationship. Hierarchical regression analyses were used to examine whether the transition to parenthood was associated with a change in marital quality. Relevant control variables were entered into the equation, along with marital wellbeing and marital tension in Year 1 (Model 1a and 2a). Given the interest in understanding the context of race, a second model was computed, including the race by transition to parenthood interaction (Model 1b and 2b).

In order to examine whether perceived admiration significantly mediated the relationship between transition to parenthood and marital quality (third study goal), the second step in the test for mediation from Baron and Kenny (1986) was followed. Year 1 *Marital Wellbeing* or *Marital Tension*, control variables, race, and transition to parenthood were entered, with perceived admiration serving as the outcome variable (Model 1c and 2c). Then, in the third step, Year 1 *Marital Wellbeing* or *Marital Tension*, control variables, race, transition to parenthood, and perceived admiration were entered with marital quality (i.e., Year 3 *Marital Wellbeing* or *Marital Tension*) as the outcome variable (Model 1d and 2d). Mediation exists if in this last step any significant relationship found between transition to parenthood and marital wellbeing or marital tension in the first step becomes nonsignificant or is greatly reduced.

Analyses of residuals and multivariate outliers indicated that two respondents exerted considerable influence on Y3 *marital tension* for husbands. Consequently, these two cases were excluded from analyses of *marital tension*.

Results

Results from bivariate analyses indicate that transitioning wives were significantly more likely to report lower marital wellbeing and higher marital tension in Year 3. They also were more likely to have less education and household income than nontransitioning wives. Transitioning husbands reported significantly lower perceived admiration and significantly less household income than nontransitioning husbands (see Table 1).

Independent samples t-tests revealed significant differences in Year 3 marital tension for nontransitioning wives, as well as significant differences in Year 3 marital wellbeing for nontransitioning husbands. Specifically, Black American nontransitioning wives reported lower marital tension in Year 3 than White American nontransitioning wives, and Black American nontransitioning husbands reported lower marital wellbeing in Year 3 than White American nontransitioning husbands (see Table 2).

Marital Quality and Transition to Parenthood as Reported by Wives

In the first model for marital wellbeing for wives (see Table 3; Model 1a), transitioning to parenthood predicted lower marital wellbeing ($\beta = -.20, p < .05$). Race did not moderate the relationship between transition to parenthood and marital wellbeing (Model 1b). As demonstrated in Model 1c, results indicate that the transition to parenthood predicted lower

perceived admiration for wives ($\beta = -.16, p = .05$). Further, in the final regression model for wives (Model 1d), perceived admiration significantly predicted marital wellbeing ($\beta = .48, p < .001$). Because transition to parenthood is no longer significant in this model (Model 1d) ($\beta = -.12, p = .09$), the results indicate that perceived partner admiration partially mediated the relationship between transition to parenthood and marital wellbeing for wives. That is, perceived admiration helps to explain the change in marital wellbeing when wives are transitioning to parenthood. Using the Sobel test for mediation, the statistical significance of this mediation effect was $z = -1.69, p = .08$.

In the first model for marital tension for wives (Table 3; Model 2a), transitioning predicted higher marital tension ($\beta = .22, p < .01$). Similar to marital wellbeing, race did not moderate the relationship between transition to parenthood and marital tension (Model 2b), although for the first model, race was a significant predictor of marital tension ($\beta = -.22, p < .05$). The results indicated that Black nontransitioning wives ($M = 8.95, SD = 2.46$) reported lower marital tension than White nontransitioning wives ($M = 10.20, SD = 2.43$). In Model 2c, perceived admiration significantly predicted marital tension ($\beta = .48, p < .001$). Transition to parenthood remained significant in Model 2d ($\beta = .19, p < .01$), indicating that perceived admiration is not a mediator of the relationship between transitioning and marital tension for wives.

Marital Quality and Transition to Parenthood as Reported by Husbands

In the first model for marital wellbeing for husbands (see Table 4; Model 1a), results indicated that, although the first regression model significantly predicted marital wellbeing, transition to parenthood and race were not significant in the model ($F(5, 139) = 9.17, p < .001$). It is noteworthy, however, that Black transitioning husbands reported higher marital wellbeing ($M = 23.21, SD = 1.08$) than Black nontransitioning husbands ($M = 22.14, SD = 2.70$). Additionally, perceived admiration significantly predicted marital wellbeing ($\beta = .45, p < .001$). Because transition to parenthood was shown in an earlier model to be nonsignificant (see Table 4, Model 1a), perceived admiration could not be a mediator and thus no analyses were conducted for perceived admiration as an outcome variable (Model 1c).

For the models predicting marital tension for husbands (see Table 4; Model 2a), transitioning to parenthood was significantly related to higher marital tension ($\beta = .17, p < .01$). Race also moderated the relationship between transition to parenthood and marital tension (Model 2b), accounting for 3% of the variability in marital tension ($\beta = -.24, p = .05$). This interaction effect was due to Black transitioning husbands reporting little change in marital tension between Year 1 and Year 3, and White transitioning husbands reporting a noticeable increase in marital tension between Year 1 and Year 3 (see Figure 1). Additionally for husbands, transition to parenthood (Model 2c) negatively predicted perceived admiration ($\beta = -.21, p < .01$). Transitioning husbands perceived less admiration from their wives than nontransitioning husbands. In Model 2d, perceived admiration also significantly predicted marital tension ($\beta = -.31, p < .001$), and transition to parenthood was no longer significant ($\beta = .10, p = .15$). This means that all conditions for mediation were met suggesting that perceived admiration mediated the relationship between transition to

parenthood and marital tension for husbands. The statistical significance of this mediation effect was confirmed with the Sobel test ($z = 2.11, p < .05$).

Discussion

Literature on the transition to parenthood indicates that while marital quality might be lower for most couples after the transition (Twenge et al., 2003), not all couples experience the same decline in marital quality (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Shapiro et al., 2000). Moreover, understanding this relationship in the context of race has been virtually nonexistent in the literature to date. In the present study, data from the Early Years of Marriage Project were used to examine whether perceived admiration mediates the link between transition to parenthood and marital quality among Black American and White American couples.

First, the findings were generally supportive of change in marital quality during transition to parenthood. Transitioning wives reported lower marital wellbeing and higher marital tension than nontransitioning wives. However, transitioning husbands only reported higher marital tension than nontransitioning husbands. Effect sizes were small, which is relatively common for examining the relationship between transition to parenthood and marital quality (Doss et al., 2009).

Second, given prior research (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997; Timmer, Veroff, & Hatchett, 1996; Veroff et al., 1995), it was hypothesized that Black American wives and husbands who transitioned to parenthood would report higher marital quality than White American wives and husbands, particularly higher marital wellbeing and lower marital tension. Partial support was found for this hypothesis. Results for wives failed to confirm this hypothesis; however, some interesting trends by race for husbands emerged. Although there was no significant finding for race by transition to parenthood on marital wellbeing, Black American transitioning husbands were nonetheless the only subgroup that reported higher marital wellbeing than their nontransitioning counterparts. It is possible that because Black American men face racial discrimination in the outside world of work that often challenges their self-concept (Dixon, 2007; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan & Horrocks, 2002), becoming a father is a re-affirmation of their manhood that has positive effects on their evaluations of marriage.

In addition, after controlling for differences in Year 1 marital tension, education, and age, Black American transitioning husbands reported lower marital tension than White American transitioning husbands. Given that more equal gender role arrangements exist among Black American married couples than White American married couples (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan & Horrocks, 2002), Black American husbands may have fewer adjustments to make during the transition to parenthood, thereby making it easier to manage or avoid tension.

Although Black American transitioning husbands reported less marital tension than White American transitioning husbands, Black American transitioning wives reported similar levels of marital tension as White American transitioning wives. Several studies indicate that women's marital quality is more likely to suffer during the transition to parenthood than

men's (Twenge et al., 2003). Further, wives tend to perceive life changes during the transition to parenthood as greater for them than for new fathers (Harriman, 1983).

Next, analyses confirmed that perceived admiration significantly predicted both marital wellbeing and marital tension for both wives and husbands. Results, however, only partially supported the mediation hypothesis. For wives, perceived admiration mediated the link between transition to parenthood and marital wellbeing, but it did not mediate the relationship between transition to parenthood and marital tension. In general, these findings may speak to the importance of wives feeling valued and understood by their husbands, specifically for their marital happiness during the transition to first-time parenthood. However, it is possible that this admiration may not be enough to alleviate the conflict and tension during this transition for wives. The changes that occur as a result of parenthood (e.g., difficulties with division of household chores and childcare, higher stress, couples conflicts) do not appear to dissipate for wives as a result of feeling valued and understood.

For transitioning husbands, perceived admiration from their wives predicted lower marital tension during the transition to parenthood. Parenthood may be another context when husbands need affirmation from their wives to feel noticed and valued (Orbuch, Veroff, Holmberg, Hassan, 2002). When husbands report this validation from their wives during the transition to parenthood, this connects them to their wives and makes them feel appreciated, thus reducing the tension and conflict between spouses. Moreover, as husbands perceive admiration from their wives when their wives are simultaneously trying to care for the infant, they may be more supportive in the care of the infant, thus reducing the likelihood of conflict. It is also likely that husbands who perceive more admiration from their wives after the transition to parenthood may have a more realistic understanding of the attention their wives can provide them. That is, such husbands may be more secure in their marital relationship, which helps them avoid unnecessary conflict and tension.

Another plausible explanation from Marital Virtues Theory is that husbands who perceive greater admiration from their wives understand their marriage as a partnership rather than as an institution for individual fulfillment. Partnership from this perspective is based upon "shared goals, the partners' recognition of each others' good qualities, and teamwork" (Fowers, 2000, p. 129). However, additional research is needed to support this explanation.

In conclusion, the results from this study revealed that perceived admiration was a significant predictor of marital quality during the transition to parenthood for both husbands and wives, and even mediated the link between this transition and marital wellbeing for wives. Although not specific to the transition to parenthood, these findings are consistent with previous literature on affective affirmation (Oggins et al., 1993; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan & Horrocks, 2002), perceived partner responsiveness (Reis et al., 2004) and the virtue of admiration (Fowers, 2000).

Limitations and Strengths

This study has several limitations. First, the time frame for assessing the transition to parenthood may have been longer than desired. Couples were included if they had their first child anytime between the first and third year of marriage. Prior research indicates that the

timing of the assessment of marital quality relative to the birth of the baby may be important for understanding changes in marital quality that might accompany parenthood (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Cowan et al., 1985). In the future, it would be prudent to assess marital quality in the first few months after the birth of the first child.

Second, some transitioning couples experienced the birth of *two* children between Year 1 and Year 3. Because of the small sample size, it was not feasible to separate these couples from couples who had only one child. While evidence of the effect of the birth of subsequent children on marital quality is mixed, there is some research indicating that having additional children in the home is related to lower marital quality (Abbot & Brody, 1985; Klinnert et al., 1992; Krieg, 2007).

Third, the couples in the current study experienced the transition to parenthood in the late 1980's. Nonetheless, these findings have important implications for current day couples. Research continues to confirm that the transition to parenthood results in lower marital quality (Doss et al., 2009; Twenge et al., 2003) and most recently, this literature suggests that variables similar to perceived admiration are relevant to that decline (Houts et al., 2008; Shapiro, 2000). Further, research on the transition to parenthood and perceived admiration for the marital quality of Black American couples is limited.

Despite limitations, there are many strengths to this study as well. The EYM data collected reports from both husbands and wives before and after the birth of children, allowing for the statistical control of marital quality in the first year. The study also assessed both positive and negative dimensions of marital quality and the transition to parenthood for both husbands and wives. Lastly, the EYM project was designed to investigate a large group of Black American couples, which allowed for important analyses of the links between the transition to parenthood and marital quality by race. Given the large cultural, economic, and racial differences between couples, researchers have recently been investigating the transition to parenthood with more diverse samples (Gameiro, Moura-Ramos, Canavarro, Santos, & Dattilio, 2011; Ngu & Florsheim, 2011), which we suggest should continue in order to understand the nuances of marital quality among a wider array of couples.

Practice Implications and Future Directions

Findings offer important insights for practitioners who provide education and counseling services to unmarried and married couples. In particular, these results highlight the need for practitioners to educate and teach couples about the role admiration can play during the transition to parenthood. In this study, given that perceived admiration was a strong predictor of marital quality during the transition to parenthood, counselors and educators can draw on these findings to coach partners on how to value, affirm and pay special attention to their partners during this stage of their relationship.

In addition, relationship counselors and educators can help partners work on their positive perceptions of their relationship to improve their relationship. A strengths-based approach to marriage counseling, with a focus on perceived admiration, could be beneficial to couples who are experiencing the transition to parenthood. Clinicians could also teach spouses

specific ways to give admiration: compliments, words of praise, or actions that validate their partner.

Future research in this area might also examine whether the meaning of relationship quality changes as a function of life transitions. In other words, it would be helpful to gain a broader understanding of how couples make sense of relationship quality when they endure any major transition. The transition to parenthood is only one of several transitions couples face in the lifetime of their relationship together. Many couples have periods of separation because of job transfers or military deployments, which could be characterized as relationship transitions. Additional research should examine whether partner admiration plays an important role in these other relationship transitions. A phenomenological study investigating common changes in the meaning of relationship quality during such transitions could make a significant contribution to the marriage literature. By examining these changes in meaning, scholars can enhance our understanding of marital health.

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Figure 1. Race X Marital Tension for Husbands

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Wives				
Variable	Total M (SD)	Transitioning M (SD)	Nontrans. M (SD)	Statistic t/χ^2
Income	43.06 (17.96)	36.62 (18.69)	46.34 (16.73)	3.25**
Education	14.05 (1.93)	13.50 (1.75)	14.35 (1.97)	2.65**
Age	24.56 (3.58)	24.56 (3.73)	24.56 (3.52)	.02
Race: Black	52	38.9%	30.7%	1.06
White	103	61.1%	69.3%	-
Per. Admiration	13.96 (1.79)	13.61 (1.91)	14.15 (1.71)	1.79
Y3 Marital WB	21.74 (3.17)	21.04 (3.47)	22.11 (2.95)	2.02*
Y3 Marital Tension	9.39 (2.51)	10.20 (2.43)	8.95 (2.46)	-3.04**
Y1 Marital WB	22.82 (1.71)	22.89 (1.46)	22.78 (1.83)	-.37
Y1 Marital Tension	8.75 (2.48)	9.00 (2.21)	8.62 (2.62)	-.90
Husbands				
Variable	Total M (SD)	Transitioning M (SD)	Nontrans. M (SD)	Statistic t/χ^2
Income	44.19 (18.27)	37.62 (18.61)	47.54 (17.24)	3.19**
Education	14.00 (1.90)	13.69 (1.84)	14.16 (1.92)	1.46
Age	26.22 (3.77)	26.08 (4.65)	26.30 (3.24)	.34
Race: Black	48	37.3%	29.9%	.83
White	100	62.7%	70.1%	
Per. Admiration	14.16 (1.88)	13.71 (2.08)	14.39 (1.72)	2.14*
Y3 Marital WB	22.32 (2.52)	22.29 (2.72)	22.33 (2.43)	.08
Y3 Marital Tension	8.64 (2.61)	9.00 (2.58)	8.44 (2.62)	-1.24
Y1 Marital WB	22.70 (2.04)	23.10 (1.28)	22.49 (2.32)	-2.03*
Y1 Marital Tension	8.41 (2.56)	8.12 (2.63)	8.57 (2.52)	1.02

Note.

*
 p .05

**
 p .01

 p .001

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Admiration, Marital wellbeing, and Marital Tension by Race

Variable	Transitioning Wives			Nontransitioning Wives		
	Black M (SD)	White M (SD)	T-test	Black M (SD)	White M (SD)	T-test
Perceived Admiration	13.86 (1.82)	13.45 (1.97)	-.75	14.03 (2.20)	14.20 (1.46)	.39
Y3 Marital wellbeing	20.33 (4.49)	21.84 (2.62)	1.19	21.55 (4.20)	22.36 (2.18)	1.01
Y3 Marital Tension	10.05 (2.75)	10.30 (2.24)	.37	7.84 (2.13)	9.44 (2.44)	3.16***
Y1 Marital wellbeing	23.19 (1.50)	22.70 (1.42)	-1.21	22.23 (2.28)	23.03 (1.55)	1.79
Y1 Marital Tension	9.00 (2.24)	9.00 (2.22)	.00	7.90 (2.45)	8.94 (2.65)	1.86

Variable	Transitioning Husbands			Nontransitioning Husbands		
	Black M (SD)	White M (SD)	T-test	Black M (SD)	White M (SD)	T-test
Perceived Admiration	13.79 (2.10)	13.66 (2.10)	-.22	14.34 (2.16)	14.41 (1.52)	.17
Y3 Marital wellbeing	22.32 (3.20)	22.28 (2.45)	-.04	21.17 (3.59)	22.82 (1.50)	2.39*
Y3 Marital Tension	8.61 (2.75)	9.26 (2.31)	.33	8.52 (2.89)	8.41 (2.52)	-.18
Y1 Marital wellbeing	23.21 (1.08)	23.03 (1.40)	-.48	22.14 (2.70)	22.65 (2.15)	.99
Y1 Marital Tension	8.67 (2.81)	7.74 (2.46)	-.85	8.03 (2.65)	8.79 (2.44)	1.37

Note.

*
p .05

**
p .01

p .001

Table 3

Regression and Mediation Results for Wives

Model 1a			Model 1b			Model 1c			Model 1d		
F (4, 146) = 6.03, $p < .05$			F (5, 145) = 6.03, $p < .001$			F (4, 146) = 3.12, $p < .05$			F (5, 145) = 16.87, $p < .001$		
Outcome Variable	Marital Wellbeing		Marital Wellbeing			Perceived Admiration			Marital Wellbeing		
Covariate	B (se)	β	B (se)	β		B (se)	β		B (se)	β	
(Constant)	.77 (.03)		.75 (.03)			.02 (.02)			.03 (.03)		
Y1 Marital Wellbeing	.32 (.07)	.34***	.34 (.07)	.36***		.17 (.06)	.24***		.21 (.07)	.22**	
Household Income	.00 (.00)	.03	.00 (.00)	.05		-.00 (.00)	-.12		.00 (.00)	.08	
Race	.01 (.04)	-.03	.04 (.06)	.06		.02 (.03)	.04		-.03 (.04)	-.04	
Transition	.11 (.05)	-.20*	-.06 (.06)	-.11		-.07 (.04)	-.16*		-.07 (.04)	-.12	
Race $\times$ Transition											
Per Admiration			-.14 (.10)	-.17					.64 (.09)	.48***	

Model 2a			Model 2b			Model 2c			Model 2d		
F (4, 150) = 16.51, $p < .001$			F (4, 150) = 16.51, $p < .001$			F (3, 151) = 4.24, $p < .01$			F (4, 150) = 21.76, $p < .001$		
Outcome Variable	Marital Tension		Marital Tension			Perceived Admiration			Marital Tension		
Covariate	B (se)	β	B (se)	β		B (se)	β		B (se)	β	
(Constant)	-.05 (.10)		-.01 (.10)			.02 (.02)			-.03 (.09)		
Y1 Marital Tension	.45 (.07)	.45***	.44 (.07)	.44***		-.05 (.02)	-.24**		.38 (.07)	.38***	
Race	-.32 (.15)	-.15*	-.45 (.19)	-.22*		.01 (.03)	.02		-.32 (.14)	-.15	
Transition	.46 (.14)	.22**	.34 (.18)	.16		-.05 (.03)	-.12		.39 (.14)	.19**	
Race $\times$ Transition											
Per Admiration			.34 (.30)	.12					- 1.33 (.33)	.48***	

Note.

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

100' d'

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Table 4

Regression and Mediation Results for Husbands

Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 1c		Model 1d	
F (5, 139) = 9.17, $p < .001$		F (5, 139) = 9.17, $p < .001$		F (5, 139) = 20.38, $p < .001$			
Outcome Variable	Marital Wellbeing	Marital Wellbeing	Perceived Admiration	Marital Wellbeing	Marital Wellbeing	Marital Wellbeing	Marital Wellbeing
Covariate	B (se)	β	B (se)	β	B (se)	β	β
(Constant)	.76 (.03)		.78 (.03)		N/A		
Y1 Marital wellbeing	.44 (.07)	.44***	.43 (.07)	.43***	N/A		.32***
Household Income	.00 (.00)	.15	.00 (.00)	.14		.00	.15*
Race	-.04	-.07	-.09 (.06)	-.15		-.06 (.04)	-.10
Transition	(.04)	.03	-.03 (.05)	-.05		.06 (.04)	.11
Race $\times$ Transition	.02 (.04)		.12 (.09)	.15			
Per Admiration						.46 (.07)	.45***

Model 2a		Model 2b		Model 2c		Model 2d	
F (6, 139) = 11.51, $p < .001$		F (6, 139) = 11.51, $p < .001$		F (5, 140) = 4.29, $p < .01$		F (6, 139) = 14.84, $p < .001$	
Outcome Variable	Marital Tension	Marital Tension	Perceived Admiration	Marital Tension	Marital Tension	Marital Tension	Marital Tension
Covariate	B (se)	β	B (se)	β	B (se)	β	β
(Constant)	-.09		-.17 (.10)		.03 (.03)		
Y1 Marital Tension	(.01)	.51***	.53 (.07)	.54***	-.08 (.02)	-.31***	.42***
Education	.51(.07)	.08	.05 (.04)	.09	.00 (.01)	.01	.04 (.04)
Age	.04(.04)	.08	.03 (.02)	.10	-.00 (.01)	-.03	.02 (.02)
Race	.02(.02)	-.03	.19 (.18)	.09	.03 (.05)	.05	-.04 (.14)
Transition	-.07	.17*	.60 (.18)	.29***	-.12 (.05)	-.21**	.21 (.14)
Race $\times$ Transition	(.15)		-.72 (.31)	-.24*			
Per Admiration	.34(.15)						-.115(.26)

Note.

*
p .05

100' *d*

10' *d*
**

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