

# CONJUGAL TRAJECTORIES

# CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

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FAMILY RESEARCH VOLUME 22

**CONJUGAL TRAJECTORIES:  
RELATIONSHIP BEGINNINGS,  
CHANGE, AND DISSOLUTIONS**

EDITED BY

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Carballo, Natalia (2018). “Mejor alfabetizadas, en mejores trabajos, solteras y en sus cuarentas: Mujeres jefas de hogar en Costa Rica”. En: *Construyendo identidades y analizando desigualdades: Familias y trayectorias de vida como objeto de análisis en Europa y América. Siglos XVI-XXI*. Coordinadores: Francisco Chacón, Albert Esteve y Ricardo Cicerchia. España, Centre d’Estudis Demografics.

Carballo, Natalia (2020). “Viudez y soltería en la costa pacífica de Costa Rica, siglos XX-XXI”. En: *Vivir en soledad: viudedad, soltería y abandono en el mundo rural (España y América Latina, siglos XVI-XXI)*. Francisco García González (ed.). Madrid: Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert.

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# FOREWORD

Conjugal life is a process, rather than a steady state, which couples achieve once they establish a relationship. The trajectories they develop throughout the life cycle are closely linked to political, economic, cultural, and demographic processes that shape their decisions, arrangements, and the roles couples and families serve in society. By studying marriage and cohabitation decision-making, the process of mate acquaintance, the criteria for mate selection, the age difference between the mates and the changing family structures among some other topics, we are able to understand how society and culture shape individual decisions as well as how individuals challenge the norms and make space for cultural change.

Over recent decades, the study of how couples form and what happens after they establish has received increasing attention from social and human disciplines. As with most fields of study the approaches vary and emphasize aspects considered relevant for the discipline in question. The interest in conjugal life from different perspectives and fields of study has frequently connected this discussion to marriage and its social forms, problems, status, rights and role. Much of this interest has been paid to analyze the quality of the conjugal bond, the conflicts and harmony in marital life, the conjugality and capital, the changes in the calendar of marriage and cohabitation, long-distance conjugality, conjugal rights, and the connections of conjugality to love, consanguinity, fertility, sexuality, paternity, polygamy, monogamy, children's behaviour, and so on. These wide range of discussions come from both qualitative and quantitative approaches and allow us to see the dynamism of the conjugal trajectories.

Conjugal trajectories can be understood as the sexual-affective and domestic stories that married and cohabitant couples produce in order to stay together. The trajectory demands the acceptance of explicit and implicit agreements that are the reflection of wider social rules and norms that impact on their sexuality, displays of affection, rights and duties, and economy.

Conjugal trajectories are composed by four elements (Cuevas, 2019): the presence of at least one partner throughout the life cycle; the existence of a legal, symbolic or consensual relationship through which the marriage or union was formalized; the coexistence as a couple under the same or separate roofs and the recognition of these arrangements by the immediate family and social circles; and the presence or absence of children born out of that relationships or from previous marriages or unions.

Research on the formation of couples has changed and increased over the last several decades, improving and deepening our knowledge on the topic. Research literature from around the globe reflects that an increasing number of couples choose cohabitation over marriage, delaying marriage and getting divorced or separating in greater numbers than ever before. The changes have both a structural

and cultural origin and show that given the extent of the phenomena that marital life is undergoing, people everyday feel more vulnerable and exposed to the pressures of having their private life under scrutiny in social networks, failing to achieve a balanced and happy relationship.

The chapters in this book present a coherent approach to the understanding of conjugal trajectories from different contemporary social problems. They represent the work of authors from different countries, disciplines and methodological perspectives who have approached it from both novel and classical objects of study to provide empirical research that contributes important results to the understanding of this knowledge. In this respect, the book contributes to the understanding of the evolving nature of marriage and cohabitation and does so from a contemporary perspective. The different chapters approach us to a variety of discussions of great relevance that shed light on complex arenas of marital life from the individual, group and intergenerational perspective of different cultures and social groups that, to a greater or lesser extent, show the impact of modernity on the intimacy of these individuals. A common finding made by several authors of the book is the increasing relevance of the partners' qualities and communication skills as crucial factors for the conjugal life; a valuation that played a key role for the election of partner for Africans, North Americans, Europeans and Latin Americans alike. This is a reflection of the deep and unequal impact modernity has had across the world, mainly among educated and highly schooled populations. Another important contribution to the knowledge of conjugal life is the discussion of the stability and length of the conjugal bond amidst the growth in life expectancy at birth, the creation and application of divorce laws, the access to education of women, and the rise of cohabitation in all socioeconomic and age groups. The evidence found by several authors in different countries point out that conjugal relationships are more intense and unstable than ever before and that individuals face both the possibility of having several partners throughout their life but also the opportunity to live with the same couple for many decades.

The discussion on conjugal trajectories this book offers can be organized in three main discussions. The first of them groups the works that consider that intimacy, subjectivity, and happiness play a crucial role in marital satisfaction and quality. In *An Exploratory Study of the Influence of Marital Attitudes and Skin Tone Perception on the Romantic Relationship Quality Among African American and Latinx Young Adults*, Sarah N. Mitchell, Antoinette M. Landor and Katharine H. Zeiders discuss, from a quantitative approach, the ways in which attitudes about marriage (i.e., desire, importance, and expectation) relate to young adults' current relationship quality (i.e., satisfaction, intimacy, and commitment). They used the Marital Horizon Theory as a lens to understand young adults' marital attitudes and relationship quality. Their research showed that for young adults, marital attitudes are associated with relationship quality. They aimed to shed light on how this association plays out for young adults of color, a research topic understudied. Additionally, they found that the influence of skin tone perception plays an important role in the relationship between marital attitudes and relationship quality. They studied these associations through a group of African American and Latinx young adults attending college. Their results indicated that

marital expectations were positively associated with relationship quality in that young adults who expected to marry one day, reported greater relationship satisfaction, commitment, and intimacy in their current relationships. Additionally, skin tone perception moderated the association between marital attitudes and relationship quality in two ways (i.e., between expectations and satisfaction and between importance and intimacy). Collectively, their findings suggest that differing levels of marital attitudes and skin tone perception contribute to young adults' perceptions of relationship quality.

In *Breaking Up Is Hard to Do: Investigating Breakup Distress and Sexual Regret in Undergraduates' Casual and Committed Sexual Relationships*, Siri Wilder, Christina L. Scott and Micaela A. Chavarin explore how the rupture with the partner amongst teenagers was perceived and felt. They did so from a survey that considered a variety of demographic characteristics and several questions of their sexual history and divided the analysis in two groups, namely the distress caused by the breakup and the sexual regrets. In both groups, they explored the sex differences, the relationship differences, and the interaction when having casual sex and being in a romantic relationship. Their results show that there were statistically significant effects found for breakup distress as a function of sex and type of relationship and that women and men, as expected, behaved according to sex and gender roles and were deeply affected by their ideas on romantic love in the breakup. Whether casual or committed, teenagers had a wide range of emotional reactions to the end of their sexual relationships. However, the authors found that still remains to be seen whether these responses are significantly different across both types of relationships. They also found that there were statistically significant main effects found for breakup distress as a function of sex and the type of relationship.

In *Romantic, Confessional and Post-Romantic: The Timeline of Conjuality at a Distance Between Mexico and the United States*, Javiera Cienfuegos-Illanes discusses the construction of transnational marital bonds over time through a dual approach and a qualitative perspective. The author first, based on multi-site fieldwork carried out in 2011 and 2012 in two regions of Mexico and one of the United States, analyzes how transnational heterosexual couples with young children deal with being separated and construct their conjuality. This discussion considers two dimensions: intimacy and domestic organization. The second part of the chapter discusses the same results of the study after a decade, based on contact with the same participants and an exploration of their trajectories of intimacy and family organization. The author uses the notion of life cycle and family trajectory arriving at paths in the definition of intimacy that discuss the romantic component initially identified and add the confessional and post-romantic components as part of the experience of geographical distance for prolonged periods of migration, in addition to aging processes.

In *Age-Homogamy and Age-Heterogamy in Three Generations of Heterosexual Women and Men in Mexico*, Ana Josefina Cuevas Hernández uses the data gathered in 81 semi-structured interviews carried on with heterosexual men and women from two Mexican cities. The author divides the discussion in three sections, namely the age-gap and age-discrepancy in the three generations of study;

the role of schooling and social class in the significance of the age-gap and age-discrepancy relationships; and the gender inequality in couple relationships. Her work aims to contribute from a qualitative and sociological standpoint to this field of knowledge that has been understudied. The discussion focused on the meaning interviewers gave to the age difference from their subjectivity and intimacy to see how their ideas on the age difference were perceived. Her findings show a vigorous and strong trend of marriages and unions between older men and younger women where great gender inequalities persisted. This took place amidst signs of cultural change in the younger generations and highly educated men and women from middle classes who perceived the age difference negatively. This, rather than being a contradiction, reveals how schooling and social origin affect the resignification of the age difference, and moreover, suggests that the power relations in the couple were more equitable.

In *Predictors of Marital Quality: What Makes a Happy Marriage in Croatia?*, Josip Obradović and Mira Čudina explore the marital quality in Croatian marriage using the Socio-ecological model. The authors aim to contribute to this field of knowledge that has also been understudied in most non-western societies, where specific historical and cultural issues model conjugal life. Their work explores, from a quantitative perspective, the subjective and qualitative aspects of the couple's perceptions on their marital life. By doing so, they aim to contribute to the explanation of the quality of the marital relationship. Their results show great similarity to the studies carried out in other social contexts and point out that marital harmony and distress in Croatia were very important predictors of the marital quality and pretty similar to the results observed in the United States and some Western countries. Thus, it seems that the values of satisfaction, individuality, companionship and mutual help – all a reflection of intimacy and late modernity – are predictors of the quality of conjugal life irrespective of socio-cultural context. However, traditionalism, marital partners' personalities, and engagement in child care are elements of great value in the socio-cultural context in Croatia.

A second group of works analyze the conjugal trajectories through marriage formation. In *Marriage Formation in Vietnam: Characteristics and Changes*, Nguyen Huu Minh and Bui Thu Huong use data from the Vietnam Family Survey and Vietnam Marriage Survey to examine the changing patterns of marriage formation in Vietnam. Due to many of the changing socio-economic and legal factors, they find that traditional expectations concerning marriage have given way to a more individualist form, such that those seeking to get marriage focus primarily upon their desire for individual happiness. Although concerns about family obligations still remain, the various decision-making processes concerning mate selection and marriage are no longer controlled predominantly by parents. Instead, the independent preferences of contemporary young adults are slowly, but steadily, serving to change the patterns of marriage in Vietnam.

The distinctions between traditional forms of marriage, which often are controlled by parents, and more progressive forms, wherein individuals have greater choice in the selection of a partner, are also examined by Shichao Du in *Education, Marriage Cohorts, and Different Pathways to Marriage in East Asian Societies*. Using data from the East Asian Social Survey, this chapter examines the role of

education and change over time in the marriage trajectories of young adults in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Educational attainment (more years of schooling) is associated with fewer arranged marriages, and more self-initiated marriages. Over time, arranged marriages are shown to be on the decline, while individual choice is revealed as the evolving form in the selection of a partner. These patterns are discussed within the framework of developmentalism.

Natalia Carballo Murillo explores the nature of reproductive strategies across family generations in *Life Trajectories and Reproductive Strategies of Costa Rican Households: An Intergenerational Perspective*. Using qualitative interviews across multiple generations, she finds that both conjugal trajectories and reproductive strategies steadily changed. Contextual factors from the larger society, such as economic stress, are shown to bring about change in familial attitudes, gender roles, and fertility strategies. Older generations are shown to be more traditional and conservative in these regards, while younger generations are shown to feel compelled to adjust and adapt more readily. Given the complexity of Costa Rican families, such changes are not necessarily easy to accomplish, as the influence of familial ties across generations can be quite substantial.

In *What Difference Does Marriage Make? Life Course Trajectories and the Transition to Marriage for Gay Men and Lesbians*, Aaron Hoy examines the varied paths to marriage among gay and lesbian individuals. Using a series of semi-structured interviews, he finds that the various routes taken en route to marriage had lasting and meaningful impacts upon the transition into marriage. A distinction is found between the “short and direct” route to marriage, and the “long and winding” trajectory, with the former route often involving large and elaborate wedding ceremonies, while the latter commonly involved relatively small, and even unplanned, ceremonies. The emotional meanings and experiences of these two trajectories were quite different, and reveal much about the complex and nuanced nature of marriage transitions for gays and lesbians.

The third group of chapters explores the conjugal trajectories through marriage stability and family structures. In *Identifying Predictors of First Versus Subsequent Divorce Among Divorcing Parents*, Joshua J. Turner, Olena Kopystynska, Kay Bradford, Brian J. Higginbotham and David G. Schramm examine the various factors that promote vulnerabilities among remarried couples. Using data from a large sample of divorcing parents who participated in a state-mandated, online divorce education course, the authors found that individuals going through their first divorce were more likely to identify growing apart and infidelity as reasons for seeking a divorce. Among those going through a subsequent divorce, though, problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, disagreements concerning childrearing, financial problems, and a combination of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse, as the primary factors which prompted their decision to seek a divorce. Their research not only contributes to our conceptual and theoretical understanding of divorce, but also yielded implications for practitioners.

Using data from the National Survey of Family Growth, J. Bart Stykes and Karen Benjamin Guzzo examine the linkages between unintended childbearing and union dissolution. In *Unintended Higher-Order Births and Union Stability: Variation by Union Characteristics*, the authors find that unintended childbearing,

cohabitation, and stepfamily status are all linked with a greater risk of dissolution. The impact of unintended childbearing is much more complicated, though, as it is associated with a higher risk of dissolution for married couples, as compared to cohabiting couples. Their findings strongly suggest that it is selection, rather than causation, which explains the association between unintended childbearing and union instability among higher-order births.

In *Dynamism and Changes in the Abia Family Structure and Conjugal Relationship: The Influence of the Nigerian Civil War*, Chigozirim Ogubuike, Mofeyisara Oluwatoyin Omobowale, and Olukemi K. Amodu focus on intergenerational variations in conjugality in different types of Abia families, comparing their changes and conjugal relations from traditional times to contemporary times. Specifically, they cast a glance at the dynamism and changes in the family structure and conjugal relationships at different eras of the family life cycle through a qualitative approach aiming to know how Nigerian Civil War affected their family structures and conjugal relationships. Their findings reveal a great dynamism and changes in family structures, with a prevalence of polygyny prior to the civil war, the emergence of step-parent and single-parent families during the civil war, and monogamy being most prevalent, with increasing single-parent and step-parent families contemporaneously. The conjugal relationship shifted from having concubines (acceptable and practiced covertly) to having side chicks (practiced covertly). The Nigerian civil war had an impact on the dynamics and the family structures of Nigerian families during the civil war and the immediate post-civil war. The authors also found out that other factors such as religion, education, civilization, and migration, among others, also influenced the contemporary Abia family structure. In short, their findings provide a better understanding on family structure dynamics and the possible use of this information in solving issues regarding family and conjugal trajectories.

We extend our most sincere gratitude to the authors for the excellent work, and for contributing to this volume. Additional thanks go out to the reviewers, members of the editorial board of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research*, and to the always helpful staff at Emerald Publishing.

*Ana Josefina Cuevas Hernández  
Sampson Lee Blair*

# CHAPTER 1

## AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF MARITAL ATTITUDES AND SKIN TONE PERCEPTION ON THE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINX YOUNG ADULTS

Sarah N. Mitchell, Antoinette M. Landor and  
Katharine H. Zeiders

### ABSTRACT

*Research has shown that for young adults, marital attitudes (e.g., desire, importance, and expectation) are associated with relationship quality. However, how this association plays out for young adults of color is less known. Additionally, the influence of skin tone perception on the relationship between marital attitudes and relationship quality remains understudied. To explore these associations, the authors examined African American and Latinx young adults (N = 57, M<sub>age</sub> = 20.71 years, SD = 1.28; 75.4% female) attending a Midwestern university. Exploratory results indicated that marital expectations were positively associated with relationship quality in that young adults who expected to marry one day, reported greater relationship satisfaction, commitment, and intimacy in their current relationships. Additionally, skin tone perception*

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*moderated the association between marital attitudes and relationship quality in two ways (i.e., between expectations and satisfaction and between importance and intimacy). Collectively, findings suggest that differing levels of marital attitudes and skin tone perception contributes to young adults' perceptions of relationship quality. Considering these psychological factors of attitudes, skin tone perception, and relationship quality, together with systemic racial/ethnic discrimination, the authors discuss future research and practice considerations.*

**Keywords:** Racial/ethnic minoritized identity; marital attitudes; skin tone; romantic relationships; relationship quality; mate selection

Demographics relating to marriage have been changing over time, especially within the last two decades. Young adults are cohabiting at increasing rates, while also delaying marriage (Lundberg & Pollak, 2013; Martin, Astone, & Peters, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2019). Despite these changing relationship preferences, most young adults in the United States expect to (and are projected to) marry and have generally positive attitudes toward marriage (Cherlin, 2004; Crissey, 2005; Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; Landor & Halpern, 2016; Scott, Schelar, Manlove, & Cui, 2009). Scott et al. (2009) examined data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) and found that although most respondents in their early 20s did not want to currently be married, 83% reported that they felt it was important or very important to be married someday, and 70% indicated that there was a good or certain chance of being married within 10 years.

Although demographic information and trends related to marriage and marital attitudes are informative, it is important for relationship scholars to understand how these constructs are associated with romantic relationship functioning. Generally, research has shown that having favorable marital attitudes is positively correlated with relationship quality (Amato & Rogers, 1999; S. L. Brown, 2004). However, whereas most young adults have favorable views regarding marriage, marital attitudes and relationship quality may differ for racially/ethnically minoritized individuals (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Broman, 2005; Crissey, 2005; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000; Scott et al., 2009). The assumption that having favorable attitudes about marriage is protective for relationship quality may not always apply when race and ethnicity are considered. What does research indicate regarding the relationship quality of young adults of color? How are attitudes toward marriage related to the quality of one's relationship for racially/ethnically minoritized individuals? Moreover, the ways in which skin tone differences *within* racially/ethnically minoritized groups affects these associations are even less understood. The purpose of the present exploratory study is to examine the nuanced influences of marital attitudes on the romantic relationship quality of young adults of color, and potential role of skin tone on that association. We hope the findings can inspire both future research on the topic and culturally responsive practitioners who work with racially and ethnically diverse young adults.

## RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IN RACIALLY/ETHNICALLY MINORITIZED INDIVIDUALS

There are conflicting data regarding the overall incidence of racial/ethnic differences when it comes to relationship quality. [McLoyd et al. \(2000\)](#) point out that although some studies find no differences between African American and White couples in behaviors associated with marital happiness (e.g., sexual satisfaction, destructive conflict), other studies show that reports of marital happiness and satisfaction do differ by race, perhaps due to additional pressures faced by those with a minoritized racial/ethnic identity (e.g., discrimination, social stigma, community stressors, material hardships, and wage disparities; see also [Blackman et al., 2005](#); [Broman, 2005](#); [Doyle & Molix, 2014a, 2014b](#); [Kogan et al., 2013](#); [Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson, 2008](#); [Phillips & Sweeney, 2006](#)). The “harms” of cohabitation have also been discussed in relation to Black and Brown individuals. These groups are more likely to form cohabiting unions as an alternative to marriage as opposed to a step on the way (see [Bumpass & Lu, 2000](#); [S. L. Brown, 2000](#); [S. L. Brown, Van Hook, & Glick, 2008](#)). And cohabiting relationships are more likely to be characterized by lower relationship quality ([S. L. Brown, 2004](#), [S. L. Brown, Manning, & Payne, 2017](#); [Landale & Oropesa, 2007](#)).

It is important to remember context in understanding this association, as it may not be as simple as one of these factors *causing* lower relationship satisfaction. For instance, among cohabiters, plans to marry resulted in higher levels of relationship happiness and lower levels of instability compared to cohabiters who did not have plans to marry ([S. L. Brown, 2004](#); [S. L. Brown & Booth, 1996](#); [S. L. Brown et al., 2017](#); [Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006](#)). Cohabitation itself does not cause lower relationship satisfaction; there are often psychological and other relationship factors at play. When looking at discrimination and stigma’s role in lower reports of relationship quality for people of color, [Doyle and Molix \(2014a\)](#) found that discrimination’s impact on relationship satisfaction for Black and Hispanic individuals is largely mediated by self-acceptance. In that same year (2014b), they published another study on the relationship between racial stigma and relationship quality for Black individuals, and found that when stigma is made salient, Black individuals report lower relationship quality only if their relationship is new. If they have been partnered for a longer period of time, they report higher levels of relationship satisfaction in the face of discrimination awareness.

Other studies have also focused on identifying protective factors for the relationships of people of color. For example, [Ellison, Burdette, and Bradford Wilcox \(2010\)](#) found in their study on Black and Hispanic couples, that shared core religious beliefs and practicing religious activities within the home were associated with better relationship quality (see also [Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008](#)). Competence-promoting parenting (e.g., warmth, monitoring, and modeling indicative reasoning) paired with few community stressors in childhood predicted positive relationship schemas for adolescents, in turn predicting romantic relationship health in Black young adults ([Kogan et al., 2013](#)). Additionally, cultural beliefs and practices like familism were shown to be associated with higher partner closeness and

support (via lower attachment avoidance) for Latinx<sup>1</sup> couples (Campos, Perez, & Guardino, 2016). Put together, these studies point to the need to consider culture, systemic forces, and psychosocial processes in order to better understand the relationship quality of those with minoritized ethnic/racial identities.

## MARITAL ATTITUDES AND THE IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

Marital attitudes comprise a set of psychological beliefs that could be better understood in their association to relationship quality for young adults of color. Scott et al. (2009) found that although a majority of *Add Health* young adults aged 20–24 did not want to be married at the time of the survey, Black and White respondents were more likely to want to be married currently (30% each) than Hispanic (25%) and Asian respondents (20%). In terms of endorsing marriage as an important future goal, Asian respondents were most likely to feel so (88%). White and Hispanic young adults trailed slightly behind (84% and 83%, respectively); Black young adults were least likely to feel that getting married was important to them (78%). Additional research finds that Black and Hispanic youth and young adults, especially Black youth, have lower marriage expectations and less desire to marry than do Whites (Crissey, 2005; Gassanov, Nicholson, & Koch-Turner, 2008; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007).

If Black and Latinx individuals generally have less favorable attitudes toward marriage than White individuals, how are these attitudes related to their relationship quality? Generally, research has shown that pro-marital and anti-divorce attitudes are associated with higher relationship quality, but these studies utilize majority White samples (S. L. Brown, 2004), report on non-US populations (Erol, 2016), do not discuss whether or not they found differences by race/ethnicity (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Riggio & Weiser, 2008), or provide no information about the racial/ethnic make-up of their sample at all (Riggio & Fite, 2006). There remains a gap in the literature regarding the associations between marital attitudes and relationship quality for people of color. Given the evidence which supports differing marital expectations for racially/ethnically minoritized individuals as compared to White individuals, as well as the conflicting data regarding differences in their relationship quality and outcomes, the influence of racially/ethnically minoritized individuals' marital attitudes on their relationship quality should be further examined.

## THE ROLE OF SKIN TONE AND COLORISM

Past research has documented that colorism is another aspect that may be related to the marital attitudes and relationship quality of racially/ethnically minoritized individuals (Banks, 2000; Bryant, 2001; Fears, 1998; Hill, 2000, 2002; Hunter, 1998; Kerr, 2005; Landor & Halpern, 2016; Montalvo, 2005). Not only does this mean that White individuals are most often privileged over individuals of

color, but that even within distinct racial/ethnic groups, individuals with lighter skin are often treated and evaluated more positively than those with darker skin (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Hunter, 2007; Jha & Adelman, 2009; Landor et al., 2013; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; McNeil Smith & Landor, 2018). This preference can be traced back to the era of slavery, when enslaved individuals with lighter skin were chosen to work in the house; their appearance being closer in shade to the European descended slave owners (Hunter, 2002). European colonization of other darker complexioned societies like those of Latinx backgrounds also serves as a context in which colorism was practiced (Hunter, 2002), and perhaps even before these eras, societies have generally preferred lighter skin tones over darker skin tones (Frost, 1990).

This preference based on skin tone persists in modernity and is exhibited in many contexts. Individuals with lighter skin are more likely to have higher education, more wealth, better career advancement, more positive psychological functioning, and benefit especially when it comes to mate choice (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Hunter, 2002; Keith & Herring, 1991; Landor & Barr, 2018; Thompson & Keith, 2001). For example, having a lighter skin tone is associated with higher probability of marriage, earlier marriage, and marriage to those with higher status, especially for women (Edwards, Carter-Tellison, & Herring, 2004; Hamilton, Goldsmith, & Darity, 2009; Landor, 2017). There are nuances, however, in understanding exactly how skin tone may impact outcomes. For example, Hamilton and colleagues (2009) found that Black women with lighter skin tones were more marriageable in areas where there were few Black men, but not in all areas (see also Monk, 2014).

Furthermore, when examining relationship and marital outcomes related to colorism, it is important to consider both the attitudes of potential mates and the perceptions of those with light or dark skin tones – this consideration further highlights variables that may impact that association beyond “lighter skin tone equaling preference or better outcomes.” Studies suggest that it is likely an interaction of others’ attitudes and one’s own perceptions that at least partially explain outcomes related to benefits afforded individuals with lighter skin in some circumstances. Examples of the impacts of others’ perceptions include Stepanova and Strube’s (2012) study where they found that White respondents give more positive skin tone evaluations to African American males that had more European features (Stepanova & Strube, 2012). Additionally, within group colorism happens. For instance, Black men are more likely to notice women with lighter skin and darker women are thought to be less attractive (Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2008; Wilder, 2010).

Racially/ethnically minoritized individuals of varying skin tones may be aware of these preferences and colorism in terms of how they impact themselves and others (Golden, 2007; Monk, 2015; Uzogara & Jackson, 2016; Uzogara, Lee, Abdou, & Jackson, 2014; Wilder & Cain, 2011). For instance, darker skin individuals report being aware that they may not have the same opportunities for relationships and marriage (Golden, 2007; Wilder & Cain, 2011). Is it the perception of having darker skin or just being aware of skin tone related discrimination. Monk (2015), Uzogara and Jackson (2016), and Uzogara and colleagues (2014)

all used the same nationally representative data set – the NSAL (National Survey of American Life) and found that skin tone was associated with perceptions of colorism when those outcome measures of discrimination explicitly referred to skin tone or shade. Some studies suggest that skin tone might not be related to reports of overall discrimination, especially when skin tone is not explicitly mentioned in outcome measures of discrimination (see [Keith, Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson, 2010](#) who also used the NSAL and [Krieger, Sidney, & Coakley, 1998](#); [Landor et al., 2013](#)). This may indicate that, in some instances, being *aware* of skin tone stigma may signal poorer outcomes as opposed to one having a certain shade of skin per se. None the less, previously discussed research points out the real impact of skin tone discrimination due to others’ – *and* an individual’s – understanding of their skin tone.

Whether it be treatment from others or personal perceptions, skin tone can impact racially/ethnically minoritized young adults’ attitudes toward marriage. [Landor \(2017\)](#) found that African American young men with darker skin were more likely to endorse positive marital attitudes than those with lighter skin (e.g., desire to marry, feeling that marriage is important, and expectation to marry). Conversely, women with medium skin tones were more likely to rate these attitudes more positively as compared women with lighter or medium skin tones. In some instances, gender acts as a moderator in the association between skin tone and attitudes; light skin tone preference and advantage seems to exist more so for women ([Frisby, 2006](#); [Strutton & Lumpkin, 1993](#)), but may vary depending on context. Our understanding is limited, since few studies looking at marital attitudes consider skin tone. Furthermore, to date, no studies have examined how attitudes and skin tone impact relationship quality. If those with lighter skin tones are aware of the privileges afforded them and have access to larger mate pools, choice may interact with specific marital attitudes to influence one’s satisfaction with their partners (see [D’Angelo & Toma, 2017](#)). It would be beneficial to know how both African American and Latinx young adults’ skin tone is related to relational experiences.

## CURRENT STUDY

With a limited understanding of how marital attitudes are related to the relationship quality of racially/ethnically minoritized young adults, a better understanding of this relationship is warranted, especially considering the impacts of skin tone and colorism on the relationship experiences of people of color. This would result in richer, more inclusive, marriage and family scholarship and better-informed family practitioners who aim to provide resources for individuals and couples who experience added challenges to relationship functioning. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which attitudes about marriage (i.e., desire, importance, and expectation) relate to young adults’ current relationship quality (i.e., satisfaction, intimacy, and commitment). We used the Marital Horizon Theory as a lens through which to understand young adults’ marital attitudes and relationship quality ([Carroll et al., 2007, 2009](#)). This theory posits that for young adults, marriage is on the “horizon.” It is a foreseeable transition,

but not one that will happen immediately. Attitudes like marital importance, desire, and readiness influence how close or attainable marriage is seen to be. Our hypotheses are informed by this theoretical framework, coupled with research indicating that young adults are delaying marriage while still expecting to marry someday (but not right now; see [Pew Research Center, 2019](#); [Scott et al., 2009](#)). We hypothesized that overall endorsement of pro-marital attitudes would be positively correlated with relationship quality, in particular, marital importance and expectation more so than desire. Additionally, we examined the moderating effect of skin tone on this association, recognizing that one's perception of skin tone could impact the relationship between marital attitudes and relationship quality in various ways.

## METHOD

### *Procedure*

The data for the current study came from a larger study focused on health, relationships, and stress in college students in the Midwest ([Davenport, Landor, Zeiders, Sarsar, & Flores, 2021](#)). Young adults were eligible to participate if they were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, enrolled at the university, and self-identified as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, or Hispanic/Latinx and White. Eligible participants were asked to come into the lab, where research assistants gave study instructions. After consenting, participants completed Qualtrics questionnaires assessing demographic information, factors related to health behaviors and outcomes, as well as dating and marriage attitudes and behaviors. Once finished, research assistants gave participants \$10 in compensation, and provided them with a resource sheet since some of the questions were sensitive in nature. The datasets generated and analyzed during the study are not publicly available as we did not obtain permission from participants to share their data in this manner.

### *Participants*

The full sample consisted of 145 participants; however, we utilized a subsample of 57 participants (African American,  $n = 35$  and Latinx,  $n = 22$ ) who reported that they were either in dating and/or committed relationships at the time of data collection. These participants had an average age of 20.71 years ( $SD = 1.28$ ) and were majority women (75.4%). Only one participant was engaged to be married, the others were dating “one person on a regular basis” or were in a “steady, committed relationship.”

### *Measures*

#### *Dependent Variables*

We measured *relationship quality* using subscales from the Perceived Relationship Quality Component (PRQC) inventory ([Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000](#)). For the purposes of this study, we looked at relationship satisfaction, commitment,

and intimacy specifically. The satisfaction subscale included three items (e.g., “How satisfied are you with your relationship?”), the commitment subscale included three items (e.g., “How committed are you to your relationship?”), and intimacy subscale included 3 items (e.g., “How intimate is your relationship?”). Participants responded using a Likert scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*. The items in each subscale were averaged.

### *Independent Variables*

To assess participants’ *marital attitudes*, we asked three ADD Health Measure questions about marital desire, importance, and expectation: “*I would like to be married now.*” (desire), “*Being married is a very important goal for me.*” (importance), and “*I will be married one day.*” (expectation). Participants responded to items using a Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (Carroll et al., 2007). To measure *skin tone perception*, participants responded to a single item (i.e., “How would you best describe your skin tone?”) Responses ranged from 1 = *Light* to 5 = *Dark*. This single item has been used before in previous research to assess participant’s own ideas about their skin tone, as opposed to how others may judge them (Landor et al., 2013).

**Covariates.** Religiosity is linked to racial/ethnic minoritized status. For example, Black and African American individuals are the most religious racial/ethnic group in the United States (Chatters, Taylor, Bullard, & Jackson, 2008) and report higher rates of religious participation compared to other racial/ethnic groups (R. K. Brown, Taylor, & Chatters, 2013; Jones et al., 2011). Latino/a and Hispanic individuals are also a highly religious racial/ethnic group in that 83% identify as religious (Funk & Martinez, 2014). In addition to race/ethnicity, young adults’ marital attitudes and relationship quality is often tied to religiosity (Ellison et al., 2010). Ellison and colleagues found that for Black and Hispanic individuals, higher religiosity was related to the importance of marriage being rated higher and stricter views on divorce not being an option. Thus, we wanted to control for religiosity in our examination of the influence of skin tone perception on the relationship between marital attitudes and relationship quality. To assess religiosity, participants responded to two questions. Responses for the first question about religious importance – “In general, how important are religious or spiritual beliefs in your day-to-day life?” – ranged from 1 = *very important* to 4 = *not at all important* ( $M = 2.86$ ; scores were reverse coded so that higher numbers indicated more religious importance). The second question asked, “How often in the past month did you do the following: Attend church services?” Responses ranged from 1 = *never* to 5 = *daily* ( $M = 1.70$ ).

### *Analysis*

First, Levene’s tests for equality of variances and independent samples one-tailed t-tests were conducted to see if any of the dependent, independent, and covariate variable means differed by gender or race/ethnicity. Because of the sample size we utilized one-tailed tests for more statistical power (see Hays, 1994).