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Marital Quality of Newlywed African American Couples: Implications of Egalitarian Gender Role Dynamics

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Abstract

This research examined associations between husbands' and wives' gender role attitudes, division of household labor, and marital quality in a sample of 697 newlywed African American couples residing in the southern region of the United States. Guided by a cultural ecological framework, we tested hypotheses specific to the unique socio-cultural context of African Americans using a mixed model ANCOVA design. Results revealed that: (1) couples reported lower marital quality when husbands had relatively more traditional gender role attitudes; (2) husbands reported lower marital quality when the couple engaged in a relatively more traditional division of household labor; and (3) husbands with more traditional attitudes who also engaged in a traditional division of labor reported lower marital quality compared to all other husbands. Although African Americans are thought to have more flexible gender role orientations than other racial/ethnic groups within the U.S., these results document *within group variability* in couple gender dynamics and its association with variability in marital quality.

Keywords

Gender role attitudes; Division of household labor; African American; Marriage

Introduction

Although the implications of gender role attitudes and gender roles for the marital stability and dynamics of U. S. couples have received extensive empirical attention (Davis and Greenstein 2009), we know almost nothing about these processes within racial/ethnic minority groups (McLoyd et al. 2002). As proposed by a cultural ecological framework, individuals' perspectives and behaviors emerge from within a socio-cultural context (Garcia Coll et al. 1996; Ogbu 1981). Thus, what is considered normative and what is valued may differ considerably from one socio-cultural context to the next, and such cultural norms and values should be taken into account when making predictions about individuals' outcomes. Given the unique socio-historical background of African Americans, some analyses suggest that the domains of home and work are not as strongly gendered as they are in other racial/ethnic groups (e.g. Bianchi et al. 2000). Historically, African American women divided their time between paid work and family labor, and they continue to participate in the workforce in numbers that far exceed those of their European American counterparts (Farley and Allen

1987; Farley 2005). Correspondingly, African American men are more involved in housework and childcare compared to European American men (Hossain and Roopnarine 1993; John and Shelton 1997). Given that gender may have different meanings for African Americans relative to European Americans, we cannot assume that the links between gender role attitudes and marital relationships documented in the latter group will hold in the former.

This study expanded on the existing literature by exploring gender role attitudes, division of household labor, and marital quality in a sample of African American newlywed couples. Our goals were to: (1) assess the associations between African American husbands' and wives' gender role attitudes and their own and their partners' ratings of the quality of their marriages; (2) examine the associations between the division of household labor and husbands' and wives' ratings of marital quality, and (3) explore the effects of the combination of traditionality in spouses' gender role attitudes and division of household labor on their reports of marital quality. Egalitarian gender dynamics are more often held by individuals who are relatively younger, more educated, and who earn more income (Davis and Greenstein 2009). Given these confounds we sought to explore the effect of gender roles on marriage above and beyond the effect of demographic characteristics. Therefore, in addressing each of our aims we controlled for education and age. We did not include income as a control given that refusals to report income reduced the sample size by $n=71$ and because income and education were highly correlated $r=.52, p<.001$. As we elaborate below, research on gender dynamics in European American families, in conjunction with the unique work/family backgrounds of African Americans, framed our expectations about how variability in gendered attitudes and activities would be linked to marital quality in African American couples. In our review, unless specified otherwise, findings were derived from samples composed of European Americans residing in the United States.

Gender Role Attitudes

Gender role attitudes refer to individuals' ideas about the optimal degree of similarity between the characteristics, behaviors, and activities of women versus men, including in their labor force and domestic roles. Individuals with traditional attitudes endorse a division of labor that segregates men into paid work outside the home and women into unpaid work inside the home, whereas individuals with egalitarian attitudes support more similar roles for women and men (McHugh and Frieze 1997). Gender role attitudes may impact marital relationships because they reflect individuals' beliefs about their own and their partners' marriage and family responsibilities (Perry-Jenkins and Crouter 1990). Because men and women who hold traditional gender role attitudes endorse complementary roles for husbands and wives, and similarity in attitudes is generally associated with more harmonious relationships (e.g., Deal et al. 1992), we might expect that couples with traditional attitudes will have the most harmonious relationships. In addition, egalitarian attitudes may be disruptive of marital relationships when men with these views eagerly embrace family life, while women with egalitarian attitudes reject traditional family roles (Kaufman 2000). Ickes (1993) argues, in contrast, that the differing roles and characteristics that derive from traditional gender role orientations mean that women and men will have very little in common, and thus that traditionality will be linked to lower marital quality.

From another perspective, given that gender role attitudes may have different meanings for men and women, we should expect to find different associations between their attitudes and European American men's versus women's marital relationship outcomes. For instance, Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1992) demonstrated that women who desired a traditional marriage—in which they were the homemakers and their husbands were the breadwinners—were more likely to marry as compared to women who desired an egalitarian marriage. For

men, an opposite pattern emerged, with more traditional men less likely to marry compared to more egalitarian men. This pattern of results is also evident in studies of marital stability and satisfaction: egalitarian husbands are more satisfied and less likely to divorce than their traditional counterparts, but traditional wives are more satisfied and less likely to divorce than their egalitarian counterparts (Amato and Booth 1995; Blair 1993; Davis and Greenstein 2004; Hohmann-Mariott 2006; Kaufman 2000; Mickelson et al. 2006). In contrast, McGovern and Meyers (2002) found that husbands' egalitarian attitudes were associated with better marital adjustment for themselves and greater marital cohesion for their wives, but that wives' attitudes were unrelated to their own or their partners' marital outcomes. This suggests that husbands' attitudes may be a more powerful force in marital outcomes than are wives' attitudes.

It is tempting to assume that the meanings of attitude traditionality and egalitarianism are universal, however, gender attitudes, like gender more generally derive their meanings from the broader socio-cultural context (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004). Therefore it is essential to situate an understanding of gender attitudes in the context of study participants. Likely due in large part to their historical presence in the workforce, African American women see paid work as central rather than separate from their family lives (Gump 1975; Malson 1983). Accordingly, in a study about the work and family expectations of female college students, Bridges and Etaugh (1996) found that African American women imagined that work outside the home would bring fewer personal costs and more benefits to their future children and expressed a desire to be employed earlier in their child's life than did European American female college students. Further, African American women, relative to women of other races/ethnicities, were more likely to see work outside the home as being compatible with caring for a family (Collins 1987; Collins 2000). Possibly because the acceptable roles for African American women weave together caregiver and breadwinner responsibilities, these women report more egalitarian gender role attitudes than women and men of other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Fan and Marini 2000; Kane 2000). There is some evidence, however, that African Americans who have recently experienced an upward transition to middle class status adopt more traditional gender role attitudes, possibly as a means of disassociating themselves from negative stereotypes about African American families (Hill 2002); as such we might expect to observe within-group variability among African Americans in their gender attitudes. In light of African American women's beliefs that they can simultaneously pursue both work and family goals, however, the negative associations between egalitarian beliefs and relationship outcomes sometimes found among European American women may not be evident among African American women.

Although African American women's labor force involvement may lead to flexible gender roles in African American families (Hill 1971; McAdoo and Younge 2009; Wade 1996), some have countered that African American men assert their dominance within the family as compensation for the oppression they face in the larger society (Rowan et al. 1996). Empirical work suggests that African American men's gender role attitudes are more nuanced than either of these arguments imply. A review by Kane (2000) revealed that African American men's beliefs are generally no more egalitarian than those of European American men. When African American men report on gender role attitudes in a domain specific way, however, they often endorse equality in the workplace while simultaneously favoring traditional roles within the family (Blee and Tickamyer 1995; Carter et al. 2009; Ciabattari 2001; Hunter and Sellers 1998). Given that African American men's gender role attitudes are not uniformly egalitarian, we expected that, similarly to European men, African American men who expressed traditional beliefs, compared to those who expressed egalitarian beliefs, would experience poorer marital quality. Further, given African American women's relative economic independence, in conjunction with their highly egalitarian attitudes, their spouses' traditional expectations may set the stage for women's

lower levels of marital satisfaction. Therefore we also expected that wives whose husbands expressed traditional gender role attitudes would experience poorer marital quality compared to wives whose husbands expressed egalitarian gender role beliefs.

Division of Household Labor

The second goal of our research was to assess the links between the division of household labor and marital quality among African American couples. Becker (1991) theorized that individuals would benefit from marriage in households where spouses had distinct “specialized” roles. Because of women’s larger role in reproduction, Becker (1991) posited that it was most efficient for men to specialize as providers and women to specialize as homemakers. On the other hand, Oppenheimer (1994) proposed and empirically supported a counter perspective, that such a gendered division of labor put couples at a disadvantage (Oppenheimer 1994, 1997), because specialization places the entire burden for financial provisions on the husband and the entire burden for running the home and caring for children on the wife. She argued that a flexible strategy, wherein responsibilities for paid and unpaid labor are distributed between spouses more evenly, is a more sustainable arrangement and conducive to a satisfying partnership.

Oppenheimer’s framework suggests that strong family foundations are built on both men and women engaging in paid and unpaid work. While women in the U.S. have increased their participation in the paid labor force in past decades, a corresponding increase in men’s housework has stalled (Brines 1994). Contemporary men spend more time on housework relative to their fathers and grandfathers, but women still spend twice as much time on core household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry relative to their husbands (Bianchi et al. 2000; Coltrane 2000). Some have explained the disparity between changes in women’s financial contributions to their family and their relatively unchanged role within the home from a social construction of gender perspective (Coltrane 2000; John and Shelton 1997; South and Spitze 1994). Men and women “do gender” by participating in the behaviors that have been prescribed by societal convention. It is important to note that, although women maintaining their role in the home even as they take on provider responsibility fits with conventional expectations, a traditional division of household labor and corresponding perceptions of its unfairness has been associated with poor relationship outcomes for couples and poor health outcomes for wives both in the United States (Blair 1993; Frisco and Williams 2003; Orbuch and Eyster 1997) and abroad (Khawaja and Habib 2007).

When examining the division of labor within African American households and its associations with marital quality it is again important to remember that African Americans ‘do gender’ differently from European Americans. African American men tend to spend more time in housework than their European American counterparts, though wives still do the majority of the work (Hossain and Roopnarine 1993; John and Shelton 1997). Unlike for European American men, however, African American men’s time in paid labor outside the home is not related to their participation in household tasks (John and Shelton 1997; Orbuch and Custer 1995), possibly because it is more normative for African American men to assume responsibility for unpaid work inside the home. Given African American women’s flexible gender role attitudes, in conjunction with findings that men’s participation in housework eases the burden on women and leads to better relationship outcomes, we expected African American wives who experienced a more traditional division of labor to report lower marital quality than wives with more egalitarian household responsibilities. Further, to the extent that it is normative for African American couples to have a more egalitarian division of labor, we also expected a more traditional division of labor would put husbands at risk for poorer marital quality.

Interactions Between Gender Role Attitudes and Roles

The final goal of this research was to study whether and how the interaction between the extent of traditionality in spouses' gender role attitudes and the extent of traditionality in the division of household labor were linked to spouses' reports of marital quality. As economic realities changed in the U.S., dual-earners became the norm for families across all races and ethnicities. This shift in roles happened relatively quickly and set the stage for inconsistencies between individuals' attitudes toward gender and their marital roles (Deutsch and Saxon 1998). Several lines of research with European American samples suggested that inconsistencies between spouses' gender role attitudes and their division of household labor contributed to marital discord (Helms-Erikson 2001; McHale and Crouter 1992; Perry-Jenkins and Crouter 1990). Wives were identified as being most "at risk" for poor marital quality when they had egalitarian attitudes yet took on the majority of household responsibilities, whereas husbands were most "at risk" when they had traditional attitudes but housework was divided in a more egalitarian manner (McHale and Crouter 1992).

In contrast to this pattern, because of African American women's enduring economic contributions to their families and the norms regarding African American men's housework participation, we expected that a traditional division of household labor, rather than inconsistency between attitudes and household roles, would put African American wives' marital quality at risk. As we suggested, a traditional division of labor is also likely to adversely affect African American husbands' marital quality given norms about men's family roles in this cultural group. When considering the interaction between African American spouses' attitudes and the division of household labor we therefore expected that traditional attitudes, in combination with a traditional division of labor would be associated with the lowest levels of marital quality in both husbands and wives.

Study Objectives and Hypotheses

In sum, the overarching goal of this study was to expand the literature on links between spouses' gender role orientations and the quality of their marriages by focusing on these processes in African American couples. Our three research questions and predictions are delineated below. Importantly, in order to take advantage of our dyadic sample and retain the couple as the unit of analysis and so as to address all of our questions using a single analysis, a mixed model Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), we dichotomized gender role attitudes and the division of household labor and created groups of more traditional and more egalitarian spouses. Our questions and predictions are as follows.

1. What are the links between husbands' and wives' gender role attitudes and their reports of marital quality? Here we tested the hypotheses that: (1a) husbands with more traditional attitudes would report lower marital quality than husbands with more egalitarian attitudes; (1b) wives of husbands with more traditional gender role attitudes would report lower levels of marital quality than wives with more egalitarian husbands; (1c) in cases of husband-wife attitude incongruence, couples in which wives' attitudes were more egalitarian and husbands' attitudes were more traditional would have lower marital quality than couples in which wives' attitudes were more traditional and husbands' attitudes were more egalitarian.
2. How is the division of household labor related to spouses' reports of marital quality? We predicted that: (2a) husbands and wives with a more traditional division of labor would report lower marital quality than would husbands and wives with a more egalitarian division of labor.
3. How is the combination of gender role attitudes and division of labor linked to spouses' reports of marital quality? We predicted that: (3a) in the case of husbands'

attitudes, the implications of attitudes and roles would be cumulative such that when husbands held more traditional attitudes and there was a more traditional division of household labor, husbands and wives would report the lowest marital quality, and when husbands held more egalitarian attitudes and there was a more egalitarian division of household labor husbands and wives would report the highest marital quality.

Method

Participants

Data were gathered from 697 newlywed African American couples involved in an on-going three wave longitudinal study of African American marriage and health (see also, Stanik and Bryant 2011; Wickrama et al. 2010). Participants were identified through marriage license applications filed in a southern state. Recruitment letters were sent to couples in which both partners self-identified as African American. Of the initial 1,018 couples who were contacted, 47% completed the wave one interview; 4% were unavailable (moved), 22% did not respond, and 27% did not wish to participate. This research uses first wave data (the only wave of the study that is currently complete).

Average age of wives was $M=33.16$, $SD=9.56$ (range=21–71) and average age of husbands was $M=35.64$, $SD=10.61$ (range=20–79). Participants reported their earnings for the past year using income brackets representing \$5,000 increments. Wives' median income was between \$20,000 and \$24,999 and husbands' median income was between \$30,000 and \$34,999. Almost a third (30.5%) of wives in the sample earned a high-school degree or less, 33.4% received some training beyond high-school, 29% earned a college degree, and 7% earned a graduate degree. Almost half (48.3%) of husbands in the sample earned a high-school degree or less, 32.1% received some training beyond high-school, 17.9% earned a college degree, and 1.5% earned a graduate degree.

Procedure

From 2006 to 2009 data were collected through home interviews. After obtaining informed consent, husbands and wives were interviewed separately. Interviews lasted two hours, on average, and individuals received \$50 for participating in the study.

Measures

Marital quality was measured by combining six items that assessed partners' satisfaction with and commitment to their marriage (Bryant et al. 2001; Glenn 1990). Items included: "All things considered, how happy are you with your marriage?" (1=very happy ... 5=very unhappy), "Since your wedding, how often have you ever thought getting married was not such a good idea?" (4=always ... 1=never), "How much do you want your relationship with your spouse to continue and succeed?" (1=desperately ... 4=not at all), "How hard are you willing to work to make your marriage succeed?" (1=I will go to any length ... 4=I have given up), "How likely is it that your marriage will last at least another 5 years?" (1=very likely ... 5=very unlikely), and "How likely is it that your marriage will last forever?" (1=very likely ... 5=very unlikely). Cronbach's alphas were .84 for wives and .82 for husbands. All items were reverse scored so higher scores corresponded to better marital quality.

Participation in household labor was measured by combining four items that assessed how frequently (1=Always ... 4=Never) spouses engaged in core household tasks. These items included: prepare meals, clean the house, do laundry, and wash dishes. Cronbach's alphas

were .73 for wives and .76 for husbands. All items were reverse scored so higher scores corresponded to more frequent participation in household labor.

Division of household labor was assessed by dividing wives' participation in household labor by husbands' participation in household labor. Thus, a score of one indicated that husbands and wives participated in household labor an equal amount. Scores above one reflected that wives took on more of the responsibility for household labor than their husbands and scores below one reflected that husbands took on more responsibility for household labor than their wives.

Gender role attitudes were assessed using 5 items. Using 5-point likert scales (1=strongly agree ... 5=strongly disagree), participants reported their agreement with the following statements: "Men should share in house-hold tasks such as washing dishes and doing laundry", "It is acceptable for a man to cook and clean even though he has a wife", "Women should be equal to men in the workplace", "Women should be given equal opportunity for employment", and "It is acceptable for a woman to supervise a man at work." Cronbach alphas were .72 for wives and .75 for husbands.

Results

Means and standard deviations of all variables are presented in Table 1. Paired sample *t*-tests showed that, relative to their husbands, wives reported significantly less traditional gender role attitudes, $t(696)=-5.35, p<.001, d=.28$, engaged in household labor more frequently, $t(695)=18.27, p<.001, d= 1.2$, reported lower marital quality, $t(696)=-3.04, p<.01, d=.12$, were younger, $t(696)=-11.21, p<.001, d=.26$, had completed higher levels of education $t(696)=10.55, p<.001, d= .48$, and earned less income, $t(625)=-10.91, p<.001, d=.50$. The division of household labor ($M=1.37, SD=.52$) was slightly skewed towards wives doing more than their husbands. It is important to note that husbands and wives in our sample tended to be highly satisfied, that their gender roles tended to be more egalitarian, and that the division of household labor was close to equal.

We addressed all three research questions using a single analytic approach, namely a 2(husbands' gender role attitudes) \times 2(wives' gender role attitudes) \times 2(division of labor) \times 2(spouse) mixed model ANCOVA. Husbands' gender role attitudes, wives' gender role attitudes, and the division of labor were between subjects' factors and spouse was a within groups factor. Median splits were used to create more traditional and more egalitarian groups based on gender role attitudes (median=1.8 for women, 1.8 for men) and the division of labor (median=1.27). Because median scores for gender role attitudes represented more egalitarian attitudes individuals with values at and below the median were classified as more egalitarian and those with values above the median were classified as more traditional. The median score for household division of labor represented wives doing more work than their husbands therefore couples below the median were classified as more egalitarian and those at or above the median were classified as more traditional. Husbands' and wives' reports of marital quality were the dependent variables.

Means and standard deviations for all variables in the study based on these groupings are presented in Table 2. Given that socioeconomic status and age are associated with gender role attitudes (Davis and Greenstein 2009) we included husbands' and wives' education and age as covariates in all models.

Using this analysis technique is advantageous for two main reasons. First, it allows us to retain the couple dyad rather than the individual as the unit of study. Second, by examining husbands and wives in the same model we are able to examine two unique types of effects:

(1) between-subjects differences compared couples as a function of their gender role attitudes and division of household labor; and (2) interactions with the within-groups factor, gender, provided evidence of differences between spouses in the same couple. Planned contrasts were used to explore significant interactions. Because cell sizes were unequal, we reported Type III sums of squares in the following analyses (Lewis and Keren 1977). In reporting the results we focused on significant effects at $p < .05$. However, we considered trend-level effects ($p < .10$) when they were consistent with hypotheses or results from prior research.

Gender Roles and Marital Quality

Hypothesis (1a) posited that husbands with more traditional attitudes would report lower marital quality than husbands with more egalitarian attitudes; hypothesis (1b) posited that wives of husbands with more traditional gender role attitudes would report lower levels of marital quality than wives with more egalitarian husbands. In support of hypothesis (1a) at the univariate level, husbands' gender role attitudes had a significant effect on their own marital quality, $F(1, 613) = 5.01, p < .05, d = .18$; hypothesis (1b) was not fully supported. The effect of husbands' gender role attitudes on wives' marital quality, though in the expected direction, failed to reach significance, $F(1, 613) = 1.94, NS, d = .11$. As Table 3 illustrates, husbands who expressed more traditional gender role attitudes reported lower marital quality relative to husbands who expressed more egalitarian gender role attitudes. The negative effect of husbands' traditional gender role attitudes was also evident at the multivariate level; couples in which the husbands' gender role attitudes were more traditional reported lower marital quality than couples in which the husbands' gender role attitudes were more egalitarian, $F(1, 613) = 4.49, p < .05, d = .17$. In contrast to the findings for husbands' attitudes, neither the univariate nor the multivariate effects of wives' gender role attitudes were significant. No spouse \times attitude interactions emerged, and neither was the husbands' attitude group \times wives' attitude group interaction significant, meaning that Hypothesis (1c), couples in which wives' attitudes were more traditional and husbands' attitudes were more egalitarian would have higher marital quality than couples in which wives' attitudes were more egalitarian and husbands' attitudes were more traditional, was not supported.

Division of Household Labor and Marital Quality

Our second hypothesis posited that husbands and wives with a more traditional division of labor would report lower marital quality than would husbands and wives with a more egalitarian division of labor. In support of this hypothesis, at the univariate level there was a significant effect of division of household labor on husbands' marital quality, $F(1, 613) = 5.95, p < .05, d = .20$. Husbands with a more traditional division of labor reported lower marital quality, $M = 4.16, SD = .45$ compared to husbands with a more egalitarian division of labor ($M = 4.24, SD = .31$). Contrary to our expectations, however, wives' marital quality did not differ as a function of the division of labor, $M = 4.14, SD = .48; M = 4.15, SD = .42, F(1, 613) = .01, NS, d = .01$ for more traditional versus more egalitarian groups. The multivariate effect of the division of labor on couples' marital quality failed to reach significance.

Gender Role Attitude/Behavior Congruence and Marital Quality

Our third hypothesis posited that the implications of husbands' attitudes and roles would be cumulative such that when husbands held more traditional attitudes and there was a more traditional division of household labor, both husbands and wives would report the lowest marital quality, and when husbands held more egalitarian attitudes and there was a more egalitarian division of household labor, both husbands and wives would report the highest marital quality; and (3b) posited that husbands and wives who experienced a more traditional division of labor would report lower marital quality regardless of wives' gender

role attitudes. Consistent with predictions, the interaction between the division of household labor and husbands' gender role attitudes was significant at the univariate level, $F(1, 613)=3.84, p=.05, d=.16$ for husbands' marital quality; contrary to our expectations, there was no such effect at the univariate level for wives $F(1, 613)=.01, NS, d=.01$, and the multivariate effect also failed to reach significance, $F(1, 613)=1.64, NS, d=.10$.

To follow up the significant interaction for husbands' marital quality, we compared husbands in the traditional husband attitudes/traditional division of household labor group with all other husbands in the sample. In support of hypothesis (3a), we found that this former group of husbands reported lower marital quality than the latter $F(1, 692)=7.68, p<.001$ (see Table 4). Results of a second planned contrast, comparing the egalitarian husband attitudes/egalitarian division of labor group with all other husbands failed to support hypothesis 3b, that husbands in this group would report the highest level of marital quality, $F(1, 692)=.51, NS, d=.05$.

Discussion

Using a large sample of African American newlywed couples, we examined associations between husbands' and wives' gender role attitudes, their division of household labor, and marital quality. Consistent with our hypothesis and past research (Amato and Booth 1995; Blair 1993; Mickelson et al. 2006), couples, husbands, and wives reported lower marital quality when husbands expressed more traditional gender role attitudes, though the univariate effect for wives failed to reach significance. Neither the effects of wives' attitudes nor the interaction between wives' and husbands' attitudes were significant, however, suggesting that, African American husbands' gender role attitudes have a greater impact on their own and their partners' marital quality than either wives' gender role attitudes or the combination of husbands' and wives' gender role attitudes. Given prior work reviewed earlier suggesting that it is culturally acceptable and normative for African American husbands and wives to participate both in paid work and family life (e.g. Collins 2000; Gump 1975; John and Shelton 1997; Malson 1983; Orbuch and Custer 1995), husbands who maintain traditional attitudes may be disappointed with the reality of their marriages. Further, these attitudes may have an oppressive effect on wives, and thus marriages with traditional husbands may be breeding grounds for discontent. Although null effects should be viewed with caution, prior literature, our relatively large sample size which provides power to detect small effects, and the clear effects of husbands' attitudes suggests that the lack of effect of women's gender role attitudes may be meaningful. This result could reflect the African American socio-cultural norm that women's roles include both financial and childcare contributions to their families and thus are not linked to marital outcomes as they are for European American women.

A second clear pattern in the results supported our hypothesis in the case of men: husbands who participated in an egalitarian division of household labor reported higher marital quality than those who participated in a traditional division of household labor. However, wives' marital quality did not differ based on the division of household labor. The latter result is inconsistent with past research, which has found positive associations between African American husbands' contribution to the household labor and their wives' relationship outcomes (Broman 1988). This null result may be an artifact of this particular data, as we relied on a very general rating scale measure of participation in housework (always to never) rather than a measure that required reports of actual time use or even perceptions of the division of labor. Further research is necessary to fully understand this finding.

Husbands' marital quality was also sensitive to the cumulative effect of their own gender role attitudes and the division of labor within the home. Consistent with our hypothesis, for

husbands, holding traditional gender role attitudes in combination with engaging in a traditional division of labor was associated with lower marital quality compared to all other husbands. There was not, however, a cumulative effect of more egalitarian attitudes and roles for husbands' marital quality. It may be that the negative effect of husbands having traditional gender role attitudes is buffered if they are engaged in household labor in an egalitarian manner. Said another way, husbands' actions may speak louder than their words. Neither wives' nor couples' marital quality differed as a function of the combination of men's attitudes and the division of labor within the home. This finding was contrary to our expectations, though it was not surprising given the lack of effect of division of labor on wives' marital quality. Results also revealed that regardless of wives' gender role attitudes, husbands reported higher quality marriages when they engaged in a more egalitarian division of labor. Further, wives' marital quality was not associated with the combination of their own attitudes and the division of household labor they experienced.

One of the most important contributions of this work is that it provides some insight into marital quality among African Americans. Although much attention has been given to the structural, cultural, and individual factors that might contribute to the relatively low marriage rate among African Americans (Dixon 2009), there is a paucity of research examining relationship processes and outcomes of those who do choose to marry (Raley and Sweeney 2009). What little work has been done has painted a bleak picture of marriage among African Americans. They report poorer marital quality and more frequent thoughts of divorce relative to individuals of other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. (Broman 1993, 2005; Bulanda and Brown 2007; Faulkner et al. 2005). Given these results, it is unsurprising that African Americans are also more likely to get divorced (Benokraitis 2002; Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Cherlin 1998; Orbuch et al. 2002; Saluter 1994), and separate from their spouse without filing for a legal separation or divorce (Kreider and Ellis 2011). Further, these marital trends persist across levels of education and income, and are present regardless of whether or not couples cohabited prior to marriage (Adelmann et al. 1996; Bulanda and Brown 2007; McLoyd et al. 2002). In an effort to illuminate processes that contribute to these poor marital outcomes this research used an ethnically homogeneous design to illuminate the bases for *within group variability* in marital quality.

This paper also contributes to the large body of literature exploring gender role attitudes and housework on marital outcomes. Since the late 1960s, in contrast to the anomalous decade of the 1950s, American women have continually increased their participation in the paid work-force. This shift has given rise to an avid interest in family dynamics in dual-earner couples (Bianchi et al. 2000). While women joining the workforce may have represented a change for European American families, African American women were used to taking on the dual-roles of breadwinner and bread-baker. Yet, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Orbuch and Custer 1995; Orbuch et al. 2002), data on the ramifications of men and women both working inside and outside the home has largely focused on European respondents. Therefore conclusions drawn from this work, though sometimes discussed with regard to U.S., and even Western society in general, should not be automatically generalized to segments of the population that were not included in the research or included in only very small proportions. That our pattern of results differs from the patterns that have often been produced with European American samples is further impetus to take a cultural ecological approach when examining racial/ethnic minority samples. By doing so, we are not simply replicating studies with African Americans, but are able to test specific hypotheses derived from an understanding of their socio-cultural context.

This research also makes two important methodological contributions. First, by using an ethnically homogenous sample of African Americans, as some have called for (Bryant et al. 2010; McLoyd et al. 2005), we were able to capture how within group variability was

associated with marital quality. Research that takes a comparative approach may miss these nuances in favor of highlighting between group differences. Further, by focusing only on African Americans we avoid the pitfall of framing African American families from a deficit perspective. Examining within group variability in marital quality lends itself to understanding why, while many marriages among African Americans fail, many others flourish. Second, this research demonstrates the importance of using dyadic data. Relying on reports from only one partner or from husbands and wives who are not married cannot fully portray processes that occur between partners. Our research had the advantage of being able to examine between couple differences as well as within-couple differences between husbands and wives which is important given that husbands and wives in the same couple can report different levels of marital quality.

Limitations and Future Directions

Though this research has several strengths and makes both theoretical and practical contributions, there are some limiting factors which must be considered when extending the findings and designing future studies. First, these couples are still in what is considered the “honeymoon” phase of their marriages. High-levels of marital satisfaction across all respondents (means=4.13 and 4.18 on a five-point scale for wives and husbands respectively) may be one reason that, although our findings reach significance, the effect sizes tend to be small. Marital satisfaction changes over time, with particularly steep declines in the first four years of marriage (Karney and Bradbury 1997; Kurdek 1999). Research that is either longitudinal in nature or that focuses on couples in the middle years of their marriages might yield a different pattern of results. A second drawback is that this study used only rating scale measures of housework and marital quality. Future studies should consider using observational or diary data or, with longitudinal designs, assess whether or not couples actually terminate their relationships. Third, this study is limited in that it did not ask about the division of childcare within the home. Marital quality has been found to dip during the particularly stressful transitions around the birth of a child and children’s transition to adolescence (e.g. MacDermid et al. 1990; Whiteman et al. 2007), and gender roles have also been found to intensify during the transition to parenthood (Sanchez and Thomson 1997). Although wives’ marital quality was not related to the division of core household tasks, it may be related to the division of childcare, or core tasks may become more of an issue as families grow and change. In future studies we wish to address these methodological short-comings by examining: (a) time use data rather than relying on individuals’ perceptions of how frequently they participate in tasks; and (b) the degree to which gender role attitudes vary across different domains such as housework, paid labor, and child care, to determine whether these differentially link to marital quality. The latter direction may be particularly fruitful given that African American men have been found to hold traditional and egalitarian gender role attitudes in different domains simultaneously (Blee and Tickamyer 1995; Carter et al. 2009; Ciabattari 2001; Hunter and Sellers 1998).

Despite these limitations, this work, as noted, makes several contributions to our knowledge of gender role attitudes, division of household labor, and marital quality. By utilizing a large sample composed entirely of African American newlywed couples, we are able to conclude that, although maintaining flexible gender roles is a strength of African American families, variability in gender role orientations is associated with variability in marital quality among African American couples. Taken together, our findings illustrate that applying a cultural ecological framework to the study of racial/ethnic minority groups can lead to a more nuanced and precise understanding of relationship functioning within these groups.

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Table 1

Descriptive information for all variables measured for husbands and wives

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Husband M (SD) | Range |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| 1. Marital Quality | .47*** | -.14*** | -.12** | .05 | .02 | .02 | 4.18(.42) _a | 1-5 |
| 2. Gender Role Attitudes | -.01 | .09* | .22*** | .10** | -.06 | -.25*** | 1.81(.53) _a | 1-4.6 |
| 3. Division of Household Labor | -.04 | .13*** | 1 | .08* | .07 [†] | -.08* | 1.37(.42) _a | .38-4 |
| 4. Age | -.03 | .16*** | .09* | .83*** | .07 [†] | -.09* | 35.64(10.61) _a | 20-79 |
| 5. Income | .04 | -.17*** | -.11** | .17*** | .34*** | .33*** | 7.63(2.84) _a | 1-14 |
| 6. Education | .03 | -.23*** | -.13*** | -.07* | .51*** | .36*** | 4.17(1.64) _a | 1-10 |
| 7. Wife M (SD) | 4.13(.47) _b | 1.67(.50) _b | 1.37(.56) _b | 33.16(9.56) _b | 6.2(2.85) _b | 4.95(1.80) _b | | |
| 8. Wife Range | 1-5 | 1-4.6 | .38-4 | 20-79 | 1-14 | 1-10 | | |

Husbands' correlations are above the diagonal, wives' correlations are below the diagonal, and correlations between spouses are on the diagonal. Gender Role Attitudes and Division of Household Labor are coded such that higher scores indicate more traditionality. All other constructs are coded such that higher scores indicate more of that construct

[†] $p < .10$,

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$,

*** $p < .001$

a, b Means with different subscripts are significantly different for husbands' and wives', $p < .05$

Table 2
Descriptive information for dichotomous gender role attitude x division of household labor groups

| | Trad household labor | | Egal household labor | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | Range | Trad attitudes Mean (SD) | Egal attitudes Mean (SD) | Egal attitudes Mean (SD) |
| Husbands | | N=206 | N=158 | N=192 |
| Marital Quality | 1-5 | 4.08 (.29) _a | 4.22 (.38) _b | 4.25 (.29) _b |
| Gender Role Attitudes | 1-4.6 | 2.27 (.42) _a | 1.46 (.30) _b | 1.36 (.32) _d |
| Division of Household Labor | .38-4 | 1.77 (.44) _a | 1.69 (.45) _b | .97 (.18) _c |
| Age | 20-79 | 36.79 (11.88) _a | 35.28 (9.74) _{a,b} | 34.61 (9.72) _b |
| Income | 1-14 | 7.66 (2.78) _a | 7.96 (2.67) _a | 7.61 (3.02) _a |
| Education | 1-9 | 3.80 (1.45) _a | 4.42 (1.81) _b | 4.62 (1.58) _b |
| Wives | | N=159 | N=205 | N=219 |
| Marital Quality | 1-4.83 | 4.10 (.54) _a | 4.14 (.44) _a | 4.15 (.43) _a |
| Gender Role Attitudes | 1-3.6 | 2.16 (.29) _a | 1.38 (.28) _b | 1.33 (.31) _b |
| Division of Household Labor | .38-4 | 1.77 (.44) _a | 1.70 (.44) _a | .96 (.19) _b |
| Age | 21-71 | 35.33 (10.77) _a | 32.14 (7.95) _b | 31.87 (9.09) _b |
| Income | 1-14 | 5.51 (2.62) _a | 6.10 (2.90) _b | 6.79 (3.06) _c |
| Education | 1-10 | 4.41 (1.76) _a | 5.07 (1.77) _b | 5.40 (1.73) _b |

Trad = Traditional, Egal = Egalitarian. Gender Role Attitudes and Division of Household Labor are coded such that higher scores indicate more traditionality. All other constructs are coded such that higher scores indicate more of that construct

a,b,c,d Means within rows are significantly different ($p < .05$)

Table 3

Means(*SDs*) for wives' and husbands' marital quality for spouses with more traditional (trad) versus more egalitarian (egal) gender role attitudes

| Marital Quality | Husbands Mean(<i>SD</i>) | Wives Mean(<i>SD</i>) | Couples Mean(<i>SD</i>) |
|-----------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Husbands | | | |
| Trad | 4.15(.43) ^a | 4.11(.50) ^a | 4.11(.41) ^a |
| Egal | 4.25(.33) ^b | 4.18(.40) ^a | 4.21(.31) ^b |
| Wives | | | |
| Trad | 4.19(.35) ^c | 4.15(.46) ^c | 4.14(.38) ^c |
| Egal | 4.21(.41) ^c | 4.15(.45) ^c | 4.18(.35) ^c |

Marital quality ranged from 1–5 for husbands and 1–4.6 for wives; higher scores indicated higher marital quality

^{a,b} Means within columns are significantly different ($p < .05$) as a function of husbands' gender role attitudes

^{c,d} Means within columns are significantly different ($p < .05$) as a function of wives' gender role attitudes

Table 4

Mean comparison of husbands' and wives' marital quality as a function of the combination of gender role attitudes and division of household labor

| Marital Quality | Husbands Mean(SD) | Wives Mean(SD) | Couples Mean(SD) |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Husbands | | | |
| Trad Attitudes, Trad Housework | 4.10(.49) ^a | 4.10(.54) ^a | 4.07(.47) ^a |
| Trad Attitudes, Egal Housework | 4.23(.33) ^b | 4.12(.44) ^a | 4.17(.29) ^a |
| Egal Attitudes, Trad Housework | 4.24(.38) ^b | 4.19(.39) ^a | 4.21(.33) ^a |
| Egal Attitudes, Egal Housework | 4.26(.38) ^b | 4.18(.40) ^a | 4.21(.29) ^a |
| Wives | | | |
| Trad Attitudes, Trad Housework | 4.17(.38) ^c | 4.14(.51) ^c | 4.11(.43) ^c |
| Trad Attitudes, Egal Housework | 4.22(.32) ^d | 4.15(.38) ^c | 4.17(.28) ^c |
| Egal Attitudes, Trad Housework | 4.15(.50) ^c | 4.14(.45) ^c | 4.15(.40) ^c |
| Egal Attitudes, Egal Housework | 4.25(.30) ^d | 4.15(.44) ^c | 4.20(.30) ^c |

Trad = Traditional, Egal = Egalitarian. Marital quality ranged from 1–5 for husbands and 1–4.6 for wives; higher scores indicated higher marital quality

^{a,b} Means within columns are significantly different ($p < .05$) as a function of the combination of husbands' gender role attitudes and the division of household labor

^{c,d} Means within columns are significantly different ($p < .05$) as a function of the combination of wives' gender role attitudes and the division of household labor