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Spousal Dissimilarity, Race, and Marital Dissolution

I test the claims that spousal differences in ideational, behavioral, and other traits contribute to elevated rates of marital dissolution among African Americans. Using data from 3 waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (N = 5,424), I find that African American spouses experience high levels of dissimilarity in traits that may produce incompatibility. That dissimilarity can account for part of the difference in marital dissolution risk between African Americans and other groups. African Americans' higher levels of spousal dissimilarity in certain areas may result from less resolution of spousal differences during initial relationship stages rather than from differences in assortative mating. The results argue for increased focus on how couple-level factors early in relationships influence racial variation in marital dissolution.

African Americans' rates of divorce and separation have historically been higher than those of other groups in the United States (Ruggles, 1997). Phillips and Sweeney (2005) estimated that the risk of an African American woman's marriage ending in dissolution (i.e., divorce or separation) is more than 50% greater than that of either a non-Hispanic White or a U.S.-born Mexican American woman. In her influential book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) describes a tradition of "love and trouble" among African American couples, with relationships characterized by high levels of affection but also by interpersonal tensions that threaten relationship stability.

Researchers have analyzed a number of individual-, household-, and community-level factors as potential causes of African Americans' elevated risk of marital dissolution, but the explanatory power of such factors has proven limited (Kposowa, 1998; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005; Tzeng & Mare, 1995). Several scholars have hypothesized that noncomplementarity between partners in areas such as attitudes and socioeconomic status contributes to high rates of interpersonal tension and union dissolution among African Americans (Franklin, 1984; Patterson, 1998; Staples, 1981), but the potential effect of between-spouse influences on racial differences in divorce and separation has received little attention in quantitative studies. The omission is surprising because it is intuitive that the outcome of a relationship such as marriage would depend on the conjunction of the partners' traits. For instance, although research has found that holding less traditional family views is associated with an elevated risk of marital dissolution (Bumpass, 2002), one might expect that risk to depend as much on the compatibility of partners' views as it does on how conventional they happen to be.

In this article, I use longitudinal data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to assess whether African American couples experience unusually high levels of between-spouse dissimilarity in characteristics likely to produce incompatibility. Those characteristics

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include measures of attitudes, behavior, and socioeconomic status. I then assess the extent to which spousal dissimilarity in those areas can account for differences between Blacks and non-Blacks in marital dissolution risk.

I also take advantage of the NSFH's longitudinal design to track changes in dissimilarity over time. Patterns of convergence provide evidence regarding the source of racial differences in spousal dissimilarity and aid interpretation of any observed effects of dissimilarity on intergroup differences in marital dissolution. Theoretical perspectives on marriage predict that spousal differences in attitudes and behavior will decline over the course of the relationship. Such convergence has been observed in small-scale experimental analyses of persuasion between partners (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). To my knowledge, however, this study presents the first empirical examination of such convergence over the course of relationships using nationally representative data of married American couples, disaggregated racially or otherwise.

BACKGROUND

Theoretical Perspectives on Spousal Dissimilarity and Marital Stability

The empirical literature on the relationship between spousal dissimilarity and marital dissolution is relatively small—focusing primarily on educational attainment and age—and has not provided strong evidence to support an association (Berardo, Appel, & Berardo, 1993; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005; Tzeng & Mare, 1995). But theories of marriage present multiple arguments for why individuals tend to be attracted to people with traits similar to their own and why partner dissimilarity can lead to union instability.

Balance theory (Heider, 1958; Newcomb, 1953) emphasizes psychological motivations. Dissimilarity between partners may produce cognitive dissonance, wherein individuals feel either that they must be wrong in their beliefs or that something is amiss with their partner. Partner similarity, by contrast, promotes mutual confirmation and legitimization of shared beliefs and perspectives (Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Kalmijn, 1998).

Exchange theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) focuses on the impact of dissimilarity on interactions between partners. Complementarity facilitates enjoyable interpersonal interaction (Burleson & Denton, 1992), whereas disagreements on topics central to individual identity and goals create relationship conflict (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972). Dissimilarity complicates joint decision making and may lead to behaviors on the part of each spouse of which the other disapproves. Spouses have expectations of each other's behavior, and incongruence in those expectations produces disagreement and conflict (Pasley, Kerpelman, & Gilbert, 2001) that can, in turn, produce a negative "cascade" to defensiveness and emotional withdrawal, reduced marital quality, and eventual dissolution of the relationship (Gottman, 1993).

Prospectively, spousal disagreement and conflict are associated with greater risk of later marital dissolution (Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1985; Hanson, 1999). Retrospectively, having little in common, unresolved interests or disagreements, and diverging interests and goals are among former spouses' most commonly cited causes for their divorces (Amato & Previti, 2003). Although not all areas of dissimilarity may be problematic within a relationship, one would expect that incongruence in areas relevant to the interdependence of the couple (e.g., spousal roles) or to individual identity (e.g., religion) would produce friction.

Some scholars have hypothesized that partner dissimilarity leads to greater conflict and marital dissolution among African American couples. Patterson (1998) cited incompatibility in the sexual attitudes of African American men and women as a likely cause of marital conflict, whereas Franklin (1984) and Staples (1981) emphasized conflict resulting from incongruent attitudes toward spousal roles. The interviewees of Lawson and Thompson (1995) identified differences in religious practice as a contributor to their divorces.

Quantitative work shows that gender (though not necessarily within couple) dissimilarity in religiosity (Chatters, Taylor, & Lincoln, 1999) and educational attainment (Cohen & Nee, 2000) tends to be greater among African Americans. Educational disparities may create difficulties in negotiating status differentials (Pearlin, 1975) and ideational conflict resulting from status-related variation in values and preferences (Kalmijn, 1991). Tzeng and Mare (1995) and Phillips and Sweeney (2005) failed to find effects of educational heterogamy on marital dissolution risk, but in each case, methodological issues may contribute to that failure. Tzeng and Mare measured wives' attainment relative to husbands' ($Educ_{Wife} - Educ_{Husband}$) rather than

dissimilarity in educational attainment ($|Educ_{Wife} - Educ_{Husband}|$). The analyses of Phillips and Sweeney include measures of wife's education, husband's education, and separate indicators of whether the wife or husband has higher levels of attainment. That specification courts multicollinearity because the dissimilarity indicators are functions of the individual husband and wife measures.

Regarding gender attitudes, research indicates that African American men are less supportive of women being in decision-making roles (Ransford & Miller, 1983; Rice & Coates, 1995), although they both express above-average support for wives' employment outside of the home (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995; Rice & Coates) and contribute more than non-Black men to household labor (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997).

Age heterogamy, which appears to be disproportionately common in African American couples (Shehan, Berardo, Vera, & Carley, 1991), is also a potential dissolution risk factor. Bumpass and Sweet (1972) hypothesized that it produces diverging characteristics and interests, as well as power imbalances. Older empirical studies do not uniformly confirm a relationship between age heterogamy and dissolution risk (Berardo et al., 1993), and there has been little recent work on the subject. Phillips and Sweeney (2005) do include measures of age dissimilarity, but, again, their specifications are likely to suffer from multicollinearity.

Bearing and raising children traditionally have been the central purposes of marriage, and the inability to agree on fertility preferences can generate conflict and personal stress (White & McQuillan, 2006). Williams (1994) found that children born to African American women are more likely to be wanted by only one of the biological parents. It is unclear, however, if that difference holds for births to married women in particular.

Potential Causes of Elevated Spousal Dissimilarity: Marriage Pools and Matching

Assortative mating is one determinant of spousal dissimilarity. The match process will be affected by the supply of prospective mates, and African Americans may face a shortage of "marriageable" romantic partners (e.g., Wilson & Neckerman, 1987). One possible response to difficulty in finding a compatible spouse is to remain single. Another is to lower one's compatibility threshold (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977), resulting in a larger proportion of couples who are less well-matched spouses (Lewis & Oppenheimer, 2000). For example, single mothers who may have a more difficult time attracting a spouse than their childless counterparts are more likely to enter age-heterogamous marriages (Qian, Lichter, & Mellot, 2005).

Potential Causes of Elevated Spousal Dissimilarity: Relationship Processes

Oppenheimer (1988) noted that a "good match" can also be achieved through *adaptive socialization*, that is, change by one or both spouses to promote compatibility. Such adaptation may be particularly marked during early relationship phases as couples are discovering and working out differences (Burke & Cast, 1997). Later, the new discoveries are fewer and adaptations that are going to take place are likely to have already occurred. Whether such change does take place will depend in part on the nature of the relationship. Personal change is not costless (Van Lange et al., 1997), and trust and communication affect partners' willingness to change for the sake of the relationship (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). Qualitative accounts among both the urban poor (Anderson, 1999) and the college students (Porter & Bronzaft, 1995) highlight mistrust as a particularly salient issue in African American intimate relationships. Goodwin (2003) found that, compared to White women, African American women are less trusting of their spouses after 3 years of marriage.

Internalized negative racial stereotypes may reduce trust between African American partners (Kelly & Floyd, 2001). In addition, psychological mechanisms developed for self-protection against racism could contribute to inflexibility in relationships. For example, in discussing problems that led to his divorce, a respondent in Lawson and Thompson (1995) observed that:

> It's hard to be a sensitive Black man 'cause there are so many stressors, like having to be twice as good as a mediocre White man to acquire the same job. To cope, I've had to be noncompromising to get building contracts from the state and city governments. So, for me, it has been difficult to compromise on a personal level. (p. 216)

Commitment is affected by expectations of relationship success (Axinn & Thornton, 2000).

High observed rates of union dissolution could reasonably cause African Americans to be more skeptical of the probability of long-term relationship success and, in turn, more hesitant about making costly relationship investments (Becker et al., 1977).

The multivariate analyses control for a wide range of marital dissolution risk factors cited in earlier studies (see, e.g., Amato & Previti, 2003; Call & Heaton, 1997; Clarkwest, 2006; Teachman, 2002). They include previous cohabitation, previous own divorce, parental divorce, the natural log of household income, the presence of minor children in the household, multipartner fertility, as well as spousal averages of educational attainment, age at marriage, church attendance, desired number of children, and attitudes toward marital infidelity, maternal employment, domestic task sharing, sexual behavior, and independence in marriage.

METHOD

Data

The analyses presented here use data from three waves of the NSFH (Sweet & Bumpass, 2002). The NSFH is a nationally representative sample of the U.S. population, with an oversample of racial minorities and nontraditional families. The interview waves occurred in 1987 – 1988, 1992 – 1994, and 2001 – 2003. I use sample weights to ensure representativeness of the samples of African Americans and non–African Americans. The unit of analysis in this article is the dyad, and I use survey responses of both spouses.

The empirical section consists of two parts. The first compares levels of spousal dissimilarity in African American and non–African American couples at the time of the initial interview and then examines the contribution of spousal dissimilarity to the racial gap in marital dissolution. The sample used for those analyses is composed of couples who were married at the time of the Wave 1 interview (N = 5,424, including 571 African American couples; sample size denoted hereafter as n_{Af}). Their marital stability is tracked through the subsequent two waves. Couples consisting of one African American and one non–African American spouse are excluded (<1% of all married couples; n = 39).

As noted earlier, spousal dissimilarity in behavior and attitudes at a given point in time is a result of both differences at the time of the match and subsequent between-partner convergence. The interpretation of effects of group differences in spousal dissimilarity will depend on whether they result from differences in assortative mating or from differences in the relationship processes that can reduce spousal dissimilarity. In the second part of the analyses, I document patterns of spousal convergence in attitudes and behavior over time. This sample consists of two groups of couples: (a) those who were married to the same spouse at both Wave 1 and Wave 2 (N = 4,539, n_{Af} = 441) and (b) a *newlywed* sample composed of couples who were not living together at Wave 1, wed between the two waves, and remained married at Wave 2 (N = 792, n_{Af} = 109). Results from the newlywed sample have particular relevance to the question of whether cross-group variation in spousal dissimilarity results from assortative mating or from patterns of convergence.

Missing Data

Missing data are a potential concern when using the NSFH (Sassler & McNally, 2003). Of particular relevance for the present study is the fact that data are more likely to be missing for African American respondents. About one fifth of all married Wave 1 respondents were not interviewed in any subsequent waves. There is consequently no information on the event or timing of marital dissolution for those couples. Although attrition is more common among African Americans (26%; n = 203) than among non–African Americans (19%; n = 1,175), the attrition appears to have little effect on relative dissolution risk in the sample. Marital dissolution outcomes are, of course, unobserved for the sample members who attrit. But the perceived dissolution risk at Wave 1 of respondents who remain after attrition is similar to that of the Wave 1 sample as a whole, and Bumpass (2002) found respondents' perceptions of divorce risk in NSFH to be accurate predictors of actual risk. Prior to attrition, 16.0% of African American primary respondents and 8.3% of their non–African American counterparts rate their probability of future divorce as *about even* or higher. After dropping couples who lack follow-up data, the corresponding figures are 15.7% and 8.2%.

For couples interviewed after Wave 1, I used multiple imputation to replace data missing because of item nonresponse or failure to

interview the primary respondent's spouse (16% of sample couples, 25% of African Americans). Multiple imputation reduces bias and produces appropriate standard errors (Acock, 2005). I created 10 complete imputed data sets using Stata's -ice- command, a highly flexible routine that permits imputation of missing data by linear regression, logit, or ordered logit, depending on the nature of the variable in question (Royston, 2005). The results presented in this article were derived from joint analyses of these 10 data sets following procedures outlined in Rubin (1987) and Royston. The major results are robust to the handling of missing data. Findings obtained using the imputed data sets are substantively similar to those derived by limiting the sample to complete cases.

The sample is representative of marriages that are intact at one point in time, not of all marriages that are formed. Thus, the sample is composed of marriages of various durations, and the results represent average risk factors over the course of marriages. Marriages of short duration are somewhat underrepresented (as a fraction of all marriages) because they are less likely to have survived long enough to observe at Wave 1.

Dissimilarity Measures

I measure between-spouse dissimilarity in eight areas: age, educational attainment, church attendance, desired number of children, and attitudes toward maternal employment, task sharing, sexual mores, and independence in marriage. Values for each dissimilarity measure capture the absolute difference between the two spouses. All values are nonnegative.

Age dissimilarity is measured as the number of years that separate the ages of the two spouses. Educational attainment for each spouse is coded ordinally in four categories: *no high school degree*, *high school graduate*, *some college*, and *four-year college graduate*. The difference in educational attainment represents the distance in categories. Therefore, if *one spouse did not finish high school* (coded 1) whereas the *other completed some postsecondary schooling* (coded 3), then the difference measure has a value of 2. Church attendance is coded ordinally in three categories (1 – 3): *none*, *less than weekly*, and *weekly or more*. Desired number of children is derived from the question "If you could have just the number of children that you would like to have, how many would that be?" It is top coded at 10.

The four attitudinal variables are measured on an agreement scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Attitudes toward egalitarian division of domestic labor represent agreement with the statement: "If a husband and a wife both work full time, they should share household tasks equally."

Support for maternal employment is an index of responses to four statements ($\alpha = .77$): (a) it is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family; (b) preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother is employed; (c) it is alright for children under 3 years old to be cared for all day in a day care center; and (d) it is alright for mothers to work full time when their youngest child is under age 5.

Although NSFH lacks information on preferences for sexual behavior within marriage (Patterson, 1998), the survey does contain measures of general attitudes toward sexuality. Sexual attitudes are measured as a composite of agreement with three statements ($\alpha = .78$): it is alright for (a) unmarried 18-year-olds to have sexual relations if they have strong affection for each other; (b) an unmarried couple to live together as long as they have plans to marry; and (c) an unmarried couple to live together even if they have no interest in considering marriage.

The fourth scale captures beliefs regarding how independent spouses should be. It measures agreement that "In a successful marriage, the partners must have freedom to do what they want individually." Values of each attitude measure range from 1 to 5; therefore, the attitudinal dissimilarity measures run between a minimum of 0 (*attitudes of both spouses are identical*) and a maximum of 4 (*one spouse strongly agrees, the other strongly disagrees*).

A potential concern with the relatively large number of dissimilarity measures is that they could be sufficiently correlated that each additional variable adds little new information. Dissimilarity in one area does, in fact, tend to predict dissimilarity in another. Of the 28 pairs of dissimilarity variables, all but two pairs (age and task sharing; church attendance and independence in marriage) produce positive correlations. But the largest absolute correlation between any pair (age and desired family size) is .11, and a factor analysis of the eight measures shows that each contributes a unique variance of at least 0.93. Measurement error may contribute to the fact that those associations are not stronger. The effect of

measurement error in the attitudinal measures on the noise-to-signal ratio should be more pronounced for the dissimilarity measures than for measures of levels and may lead to attenuation in the estimated effects.

Control Variables

To capture the possibility that the combined family formation background experiences of husbands and wives may have multiplicative rather than additive effects (Wolfinger, 2002), cohabitation, divorce, and parental divorce were each coded using two variables: the first indicating if one spouse had experienced the outcome in question and the second indicating if both had experienced it. The presence of children is a dichotomous indicator with a value of 1 if the *household included minor children* of at least one member of the couple and 0 *otherwise*. Multipartner fertility is also a binary variable, indicating if either parent had a child by a partner other than the current spouse. Spousal attitudes toward infidelity are measured through level of agreement with the statement, "Married couples ought to overlook isolated occasions of sexual unfaithfulness." The control in the model represents the average of the two spouses' response. Spouse averages in age, educational attainment, church attendance, desired number of children, and the four other attitude scales are derived from measures discussed in the preceding section. For instance, as noted earlier, educational attainment is coded in four categories (1 – 4). If *one spouse did not finish high school* (coded 1) whereas the *other completed some postsecondary schooling* (coded 3), then the average educational attainment of the couple is entered as 2.

Outcome and Analytic Approach

I use Cox proportional hazard models to estimate how spousal dissimilarity and other characteristics at Wave 1 predict subsequent marital dissolution and assess dissimilarity's contribution to Black/non-Black differences in that risk. The analytic design of using Wave 1 characteristics to predict future outcomes obviates problems related to causal ordering, though not, as discussed later, all potential threats to causal interpretation. Event history models are the natural modeling choice in cases where the outcome involves the rate at which an event, such as divorce, occurs. The risk of divorce varies over the course of marriage, and Cox proportional hazard models possess the virtue of requiring no assumptions regarding the shape of the baseline dissolution risk over the course of the marriage (Heaton & Call, 1995).

One assumption that Cox proportional hazard models do make is that the magnitudes of the covariates' effects remain proportional at different durations. To satisfy the proportional hazards assumption, I stratified the analyses by two independent variables whose effects were found to be inconsistent with that assumption in Schoenfeld residual-based examinations of relationships between independent variables and dissolution risk at different durations (see Therneau & Grambsch, 2000, for a discussion of Schoenfeld residuals and their use in testing for proportionality): whether either spouse had cohabited previously and the presence of a minor child in the household. Poststratification, the models were not found to violate the proportionality assumption. As with the handling of missing data, the central findings are qualitatively unaffected by the choice to stratify.

I observe the status of each marriage for up to 16 years after the initial interview. In the event history analyses, a marriage is considered dissolved at the date of divorce or of separation not followed by reunification. Reunifications may occur after the date of last observation, but they are too rare to have any substantive effect on the results. Marriages in which no dissolution was observed (87% of all couples, 82% of African Americans) are treated as censored either at the date of final interview or for couples who experienced the death of one of the spouses (9% of the sample) at the date of that death. Because of financial constraints, NSFH interviewed only a subsample (roughly half) of all respondents in Wave 3. Data on marital dissolution are generally censored earlier for couples who are not observed at Wave 3. Event history techniques are well equipped to handle censored data (Klein & Moeschberger, 1997).

RESULTS

Descriptive characteristics of African American and non–African American couples are presented in Table 1. The two groups differ significantly on a number of characteristics including income, spouses' average educational attainment, children in the home, multipartner fertility, parental

Table 1. *Respondent Characteristics: Marital Dissolution and Potential Predictors*

	African Americans		Non–African Americans	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Marital dissolution observed	0.18**	0.39	0.12	0.33
Household income (log)	10.11**	1.13	10.40	1.04
Previous divorce				
Either[a]	0.28	0.45	0.26	0.44
Both[b]	0.07	0.25	0.08	0.28
Previous cohabitation				
Either[a]	0.26	0.44	0.23	0.42
Both[b]	0.08	0.27	0.09	0.28
Parents divorced/separated				
Either[a]	0.38**	0.49	0.22	0.42
Both[b]	0.06**	0.24	0.02	0.15
Multipartner fertility[c]	0.22**	0.42	0.12	0.32
Minor children in household[c]	0.58**	0.49	0.52	0.50
Couple *M*				
Age at marriage	25.94*	8.02	24.93	7.56
Educational attainment[d]	2.17**	0.94	2.53	0.94
Church attendance[e]	1.32**	0.60	1.17	0.70
Desired number of children	3.33**	1.62	2.90	1.34
Expressed attitudes				
Support maternal employment[f]	2.69**	0.80	2.48	0.81
Egalitarian task sharing[f]	4.16	0.60	4.14	0.57
Liberal sex/cohabitation attitudes[f]	2.42	0.80	2.40	0.88
Independence in marriage[f]	3.46**	0.86	3.71	0.80
Forgive infidelity[f]	2.36**	0.89	1.99	0.81
Difference measures				
Age	3.90	4.09	3.66	3.96
Educational attainment[g]	0.64	0.74	0.64	0.72
Church attendance[g]	0.45**	0.59	0.36	0.56
Desired number of children[g]	1.60**	1.91	0.84	1.32
Support maternal employment[g]	0.80**	0.63	0.71	0.58
Egalitarian task sharing[g]	0.76	0.83	0.69	0.76
Liberal sex/cohabitation attitudes[g]	0.83**	0.69	0.68	0.65
Independence in marriage[g]	1.10**	0.95	0.90	0.88
N	571		4,853	

Note: All values represent weighted averages.

[a]Coded as: 0 = *neither spouse*, 1 = *either spouse*. [b]0 = *not both spouses*, 1 = *both spouses*. [c]0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*. [d]1 = *less than high school graduate*, 2 = *high school graduate*, 3 = *some college*, 4 = *four-year college graduate*. Couple average can be noninteger. [e]Coded as: 1 = *none*, 2 = *some, but less than weekly*, 3 = *weekly or more*. [f]Range between 1 and 5. [g]All nonnegative. Zero signifies no spousal difference.

Significance of difference from non–African American average: †$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ (two-tailed).

separation, approval of maternal employment, and tolerance of infidelity. More important for the present purposes, the data confirm that African American couples do indeed tend to exhibit more spousal dissimilarity than do their non–African American counterparts. Absolute between-spouse discrepancies are greater among African Americans than non–African Americans on seven of the eight measures. Both groups experience similar levels of spousal dissimilarity in the eighth area, educational attainment. Of the other seven measures, African Americans' levels of dissimilarity are statistically distinguishable from non–African Americans' on five: church

attendance, desired number of children, support for maternal employment, sexual attitudes, and beliefs regarding appropriate levels of independence in marriage.

The estimates of dissimilarity in desires for total family size could be biased by multipartner fertility, which, as shown in Table 1, is more common among African Americans than among other groups (see also Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006). When one spouse has children who are not biological offspring of the other, the spouses' respective number of children may differ. In such cases, spousal differences in preferred family size may represent discrepancies in current parity rather than in desires. In the NSFH data, multipartner fertility is, in fact, correlated with spousal dissimilarity in desired numbers of children. But multipartner fertility does not account for the racial difference in discrepant expressed fertility desires. That difference declines little (.73 children vs. .76 children) after controlling for multipartner fertility.

Table 2 uses Cox proportional hazard models to assess racial differences in marital dissolution risk. Column 1 presents a baseline estimate of the intergroup difference in marital dissolution risk without adjusting for potential explanatory factors. At baseline, dissolution risk is roughly 50% higher for African Americans than for non–African Americans. The control variables are added in Column 2. Because they are not of substantive significance here, the estimated effects of those variables are omitted from the table. The associations accord with expectations, however,

Table 2. *Cox Proportional Hazard Estimates of the Association of Race and Spousal Dissimilarity With Marital Dissolution Risk (N = 5,424)*

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
Variables	β	[e^{β}]	(*SE* β)	[*p*]	β	[e^{β}]	(*SE* β)	[*p*]	β	[e^{β}]	(*SE* β)	[*p*]
African American	0.411**	[1.509]	(0.110)	[0.001]	0.337**	[1.400]	(0.123)	[0.006]	0.258*	[1.294]	(0.126)	[0.040]
Difference measures												
Age									0.023†	[1.023]	(0.012)	[0.058]
Educational attainment									0.123*	[1.131]	(0.059)	[0.036]
Church attendance									0.104	[1.110]	(0.072)	[0.146]
Desired number of children									0.077†	[1.080]	(0.040)	[0.057]
Maternal employment									0.074	[1.077]	(0.075)	[0.326]
Domestic task sharing									0.105†	[1.110]	(0.062)	[0.091]
Premarital sex/cohabitation									−0.004	[0.996]	(0.072)	[0.959]
Independence in marriage									0.042	[1.043]	(0.054)	[0.435]
Additional background controls[a]	No				Yes				Yes			
Log pseudolikelihood	−4,825.9				−3,911.4				−3,895.0			
Model χ^2	13.63				177.68				264.21			
df	1				18				26			

Note: e^{β} = exponentiated β. Models 2 and 3 are stratified by the presence of minor children in the household and whether either spouse had cohabited previously. Difference measures are absolute husband-wife differences in age in years; number of children desired; educational attainment in four categories: 1 = *less than high school graduate*, 2 = *high school graduate*, 3 = *some college*, 4 = *four-year college graduate*; church attendance in three categories: 1 = *none*, 2 = *some, but less than weekly*, 3 = *weekly or more*; and attitudinal indexes that run from 0 to 5.

[a]Additional background controls consist of Wave 1 measures of the log of household income; presence of minor children in the household; multipartner fertility; whether either or both spouses had cohabited, had been divorced, or had a parent who divorced; couple averages of age at marriage, educational attainment, church attendance, and desired number of children; and expressed attitudes toward maternal employment, task sharing in the home, sex/cohabitation, independence in marriage, and forgiveness of infidelity.

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ (two-tailed).

and are statistically significant for age at marriage, previous divorce, parental divorce, educational attainment, church attendance, attitudes toward premarital sexual activity, and tolerance of infidelity. The decline in the exponentiated β of the African American indicator between the first and the second columns suggests that, together, these variables can account for about 21% of the racial difference in marital dissolution risk.

The spousal dissimilarity measures are added in Column 3. Overall, spousal dissimilarity does tend to predict increased risk of marital dissolution with seven of the eight coefficients being positive. Four of the seven have p values of .10 or below in two-tailed tests—age, educational attainment, desired family size, and task sharing, whereas church attendance falls just short. Jointly, they are significant at $p < .05$. Adding the dissimilarity measures reduces the unexplained racial difference in marital dissolution risk by an amount equal to an additional 21% of the baseline gap, which is a statistically significant change ($\chi^2 = 7.419$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$) (see Clogg, Petkova, & Haritou, 1995, for a discussion of cross-model parameter testing).

These models implicitly assume that the effect of dissimilarity on dissolution risk is similar for both groups. Models with full race interactions show no strong evidence that one group's dissolution risk tends to be more or less sensitive to dissimilarity than the other's. Three of the race interaction terms for the eight dissimilarity measures have positive coefficients, whereas five coefficients are negative. One of the positive interaction terms is significant at $p < .01$ (educational attainment), and two of the negative interaction terms have p values less than .10 (task sharing and independence in marriage).

Convergence in Spousal Traits

The most straightforward reading of the preceding results is that African American spouses experience more spousal dissimilarity than other couples at the time the match is made and that the dissimilarity increases the risk of marital dissolution. One observation that bears noting is that the areas in which African American spouses were disproportionately dissimilar were the more malleable characteristics: attitudes and behavior. Dissimilarity in those areas may result from less resolution of between-spouse differences over the course of the relationship rather than from initial matching. If the relative lack of dissimilarity reduction results from unmeasured relationship characteristics (e.g., trust, communication) that may themselves be important causes of elevated dissolution risk, then the association between dissimilarity and dissolution could reflect the effect of those latent characteristics rather than a causal effect of dissimilarity. In this section, I examine attitudinal and behavioral change over time to assess whether larger spousal differences among African Americans appear to result from larger initial differences or from less spousal convergence.

The theoretical perspectives discussed earlier predict that spouses will become more similar over time. Table 3 examines patterns of change

Table 3. *Change in Spousal Dissimilarity Between Waves—All Marriages That Were Intact at Both Waves 1 and 2*

	Average Couple Dissimilarity (Wave 1)			Average Couple Dissimilarity (Wave 2)			Change in Dissimilarity (Wave 2 − Wave 1)		
	African American (1a)	Non–Af-Am[c] (1b)	Difference (1c)	African American (2a)	Non–Af-Am[c] (2b)	Difference (2c)	African American (3a)	Non–Af-Am[c] (3b)	Difference (3c)
Church attendance[a]	0.468	0.342	+0.126**	0.434	0.333	+0.101**	−0.034	−0.009	−0.025
Maternal employment[b]	0.788	0.716	+0.072†	0.711	0.714	−0.003	−0.077**	−0.002	−0.075†
Premarital sex/cohabitation[b]	0.842	0.682	+0.161**	0.778	0.638	+0.140**	−0.064	−0.044**	−0.021
N	441	4,098		441	4,098		441	4,098	

[a]Coded as: 1 = *none*, 2 = *some, but less than weekly*, 3 = *weekly or more*. Min – Max range of difference: 0 – 2. [b]Index running from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5 (higher scores represent more supportive/accepting attitudes). Spousal differences run from a minimum of 0 (*no difference*) to a maximum of 4. [c]Non–Af-Am denotes non–African American.

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ (two-tailed); significance noted only for the three difference columns and Columns 3a and 3b.

in spousal dissimilarity in church attendance and approval of maternal employment and premarital sexual activity among couples whose marriages were intact at both Waves 1 and 2. Because of changes in the NSFH questionnaire between the two waves, it was not possible to analyze convergence in desired family size, task sharing in the home, or spousal independence. Survey alterations also prevent analyses of convergence between Waves 2 and 3.

Columns 1a and 1b of Table 3 present average levels of couple dissimilarity at Wave 1 for African Americans and non–African Americans, respectively. This sample differs from the sample used in the multivariate analyses in that it excludes couples who were no longer intact at Wave 2. Again in this sample, African American couples experience greater average spousal dissimilarity. Corresponding dissimilarity figures for those couples at Wave 2 are shown in Columns 2a and 2b. Columns 3a and 3b display the change in dissimilarity between the waves. The values in those two columns are negative for both African Americans and non–African Americans, suggesting a trend toward declining dissimilarity over time. The between-wave reduction in dissimilarity in attitudes toward premarital sexuality is statistically significant ($p < .01$) for non–African Americans and for the sample as a whole. The dissimilarity decline in attitudes toward maternal employment is statistically significant for African Americans ($p < .01$; $p < .07$ for the sample as a whole). Note that these trends only represent convergence among couples who actually remain married. One might expect less spousal convergence to occur within marriages that ended up dissolving between waves.

But there is no evidence of less convergence among African American couples than their counterparts from other groups. If anything, dissimilarity appears to decline more among African American couples than among non–African Americans, though I do not find highly reliable between-group differences in convergence. These results suggest that the elevated levels of dissimilarity result from initial matching rather than differences in convergence. To confirm that, however, it would be necessary to observe the characteristics of each partner before they meet. Such survey data do not exist, at least not for both partners. The premarital characteristics of primary respondents in the newlywed sample who married between the two waves are observed. Although the premarital characteristics of their spouses are unknown, their Wave 2 characteristics are observed. These data allow assessment of whether newlywed primary respondents change to become more similar to their spouses as observed at Wave 2.

This "one-sided" approach to gauging convergence implicitly assumes no movement on the part of the other spouse, an assumption that is, of course, untenable. The empirical question is what bias is introduced by the faulty assumption. To test this, the top panel of Table 4 presents results using the one-sided approach on the same sample examined in Table 3. The figures in Columns 1a and 1b now list dissimilarities between primary respondents at Wave 1 and their spouses at Wave 2. Columns 2a and 2b list average spousal dissimilarities at Wave 2 (just as in Table 3). Consequently, the convergence measures in Columns 3a and 3b now represent the extent to which the characteristics of primary respondents migrate toward those of the secondary respondents.

Wave 1 dissimilarity is greater in the top panel of Table 4 than in Table 3. This, in turn, results in greater estimated convergence between waves because the Wave 2 differences are identical in both approaches. The one-sided approach overestimates spousal convergence because it captures both the tendency of spouses to gravitate toward each other's attitudes and behaviors over time and the tendency to move in the same direction (e.g., both becoming more religious). Those two processes are disentangled when changes in both spouses are observed but such disentanglement is not possible when change is observed for only one spouse.

Although both the total amount of convergence and the magnitude of the Wave 1 differences are biased upward in the one-sided approach, the patterns of racial differences appear unaffected. African Americans still experience greater initial spousal dissimilarity and similar—if anything, somewhat greater—convergence. The one-sided analysis using the sample from Table 3 was performed to determine the feasibility of using the one-sided approach to estimate Black/non-Black differences in dissimilarity between eventual spouses before the marriage (and, ideally before the relationship starts) and to estimate subsequent convergence during the early phases of the relationship. The preceding results suggest that, despite overestimating absolute levels of initial differences and

Table 4. *Change in Primary Respondents' Church Attendance and Attitudes Between Waves 1 and 2 Toward Those of Their Spouses' At Wave 2*

	Average Couple Dissimilarity (Wave 1) $\lvert Respondent_{Wave1} - Spouse_{Wave2} \rvert$[a]			Average Couple Dissimilarity (Wave 2) $\lvert Respondent_{Wave2} - Spouse_{Wave2} \rvert$[b]			Change in Dissimilarity (Wave 2 − Wave 1)		
	African American (1a)	Non – Af-Am[c] (1b)	Difference (1c)	African American (2a)	Non – Af-Am[c] (2b)	Difference (2c)	African American (3a)	Non – Af-Am[c] (3b)	Difference (3c)
Couples married at both Waves 1 and 2									
Church attendance	0.580	0.452	+0.128**	0.434	0.333	+0.101**	−0.146**	−0.118**	−0.027
Maternal employment	0.840	0.782	+0.057	0.711	0.714	−0.003	−0.129**	−0.068**	−0.061
Premarital sex/cohabitation	0.897	0.724	+0.073**	0.778	0.638	+0.140**	−0.118**	−0.086**	−0.033
n	441	4,098		441	4,098		441	4,098	
Newlyweds (married between Waves 1 and 2)									
Church attendance	0.663	0.597	+0.066	0.417	0.312	+0.105	−0.246**	−0.286**	+0.040
Maternal employment	0.794	0.899	−0.105	0.765	0.653	+0.112	−0.029	−0.246**	+0.217*
Premarital sex/cohabitation	0.835	0.730	+0.105	0.835	0.634	+0.202*	0.000	−0.096**	+0.097
n	119	812		119	812		119	812	

[a]Absolute difference between the primary respondent's characteristic at Wave 1 and their spouse's at Wave 2. [b]Absolute difference between the primary respondent and spouse at Wave 2. [c]Non–Af-Am denotes non–African American.

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ (two-tailed); significance noted only for the three difference columns and Columns 3a and 3b.

subsequent convergence, the one-sided approach nonetheless provides reasonably reliable intergroup comparisons. That being the case, the lower panel of Table 4 presents data on dissimilarity and change in dissimilarity for couples who wed between the two waves (*newlyweds*).

The between-group patterns of dissimilarity change are much different for the newlyweds. As discussed earlier, this initial period should be characterized by particularly rapid attitudinal and behavioral convergence. Among non–African American couples, this expectation is confirmed. The decline in dissimilarity between waves is greater on all three measures for newlyweds than for nonnewlyweds, with this *newlywed effect* being statistically significant ($p < .01$, not shown in the table) for church attendance and attitudes toward maternal employment. By contrast, African American couples exhibit no newlywed effect. The magnitude of convergence is smaller among African American newlyweds relative to nonnewlyweds on two of the three measures, and newlyweds' convergence patterns are not statistically different from nonnewlyweds on any of the three.

The small size of the African American newlywed sample militates against finding statistically significant effects, but even the direction of the newlywed-nonnewlywed convergence differences among African Americans contradicts expectations. The results suggest that the greater average couple dissimilarity in attitudes and religiosity between African American spouses results largely (though not necessarily wholly) from less spousal convergence in the early phases of the relationship.

DISCUSSION

Some scholars have hypothesized that African Americans' elevated marital dissolution rates result partially from dissimilarity between male and female partners. The findings in this study confirm that African American couples experience greater between-spouse dissimilarity than non–African Americans in a number of areas that could reasonably create "trouble" (Collins, 2000) within intimate relationships. The analyses cover a wider range of potential areas of dissimilarity than have been addressed in previous research and specifically examine differences between spouses rather than average differences between men and women overall.

The results also show that greater spousal dissimilarity is associated with an elevated risk of marital dissolution in subsequent years, conforming to theoretical expectations discussed earlier and contrasting with previous empirical work that either used relative wife-husband measures rather than absolute dissimilarity or used model specifications likely to produce multicollinearity. The results also show that African American couples' higher levels of dissimilarity in the measures examined here can account for roughly one fifth of the marital dissolution gap, a substantively important magnitude that compares favorably with the cumulative amount explained by a wide array of dissolution risk factors examined in earlier literature. And as noted in the Method section, the estimated attitudinal dissimilarity effects are likely to be attenuated by measurement error.

The multivariate results can be interpreted in more than one way, however. To make sense of the statistical associations, it is necessary to understand why African American spouses tend to be less closely matched. If the high levels of dissimilarity are present at the initiation of the relationship and dissimilarity causes conflicts that raise the risk of marital dissolution, then this suggests a focus on how the conditions under which couples enter marriage affect their dissolution risk. The results in this article provide the first documentation of between-spouse attitudinal convergence among American couples using nationally representative survey data over a multiyear period; analyses of spousal convergence patterns in the main sample provide no evidence that African American couples' higher levels of dissimilarity result from less reduction of spousal differences over time. If this is true, then the greater average dissimilarity results from interpersonal differences in those characteristics at the time of the match.

Analyses of the newlywed sample, however, suggest that racial differences in relationship processes during the initial phases of the relationship may contribute to greater dissimilarity among African Americans couples. Non–African American couples experienced rates of between-spouse attitudinal and behavioral convergence during those initial phases that were much faster than in later ones. By contrast, African American newlyweds exhibited no such accelerated convergence. If, as discussed earlier, African American newlyweds possess lower expectations of relationship success than their non–African

American counterparts, then they may require more time to gain sufficient confidence in the probability of long-term payoff (Becker et al., 1977) to justify the personal sacrifice entailed in the "mutual adaptations that are so essential to stable relationships" (Oppenheimer, 1988, pp. 583 – 584).

The convergence results are intriguing and merit further study although there are several reasons to be cautious in interpreting them. First, the size of the newlywed sample is small, which makes some of the conclusions about convergence during the first years of relationships more suggestive than firm. In addition, the analyses of between-spouse dissimilarity change among newlywed couples are based on observations of change by only one spouse. This approach clearly produces overestimates of the total amount of convergence. But tests here suggest that with respect to between-group comparisons of convergence, the one-sided and two-sided approaches produce similar results. Finally, we do not observe change in dissimilarity among couples who separate before Wave 2, and that attrition may lead to underestimates of racial differences in convergence using either approach. If couples who attrit through dissolution also tend to experience less convergence, then the total amount of dissimilarity reduction that occurs within couples may be overstated. Because African American couples are more likely to divorce or separate, their convergence levels would be overstated the most. It is unclear how important this source of bias is, but it warrants further examination.

The results presented here demonstrate that analyzing the fit of spouses' characteristics can improve our understanding of the sources of racial differences in marital stability. Further investigation is required to disentangle whether the observed association between spousal dissimilarity and marital dissolution reflects a causal effect or the influence of unobserved latent relationship processes. In addition, a substantial dissolution gap remains unaccounted for by the factors examined here. The preceding results suggest greater focus on the conditions under which matches are made as well as effects of factors such as trust and commitment during the early stages of relationship development.

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