

The Impact of Marginalized Identity on Relationship Satisfaction

Yara Kyrychenko, J.W. Chin, Sharon Lee, Ana Leonard, Anjola Tega, and Ralph Spina

Department of Psychology, New York University

All happy couples resemble one another; every unhappy couple is unhappy in its own way. To shed light on some of those ways, we investigated how possessing a marginalized identity contributes to relationship satisfaction through the lens of the Minority Stress Model. Using a nationally representative dataset about romantic relationships, we found that respondents in sexual minority, interracial, and low-income relationships reported lower levels of satisfaction. We discovered that Black respondents in interracial relationships reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction compared to Black people in intraracial relationships. Additionally, our findings confirmed that males who earn less than their partners report lower levels of satisfaction. We demonstrate that, despite increased public approval of minority couples, they continue to face unique challenges that impact their relationship satisfaction.

Keywords: Minority Stress Theory, Sexual Minority, Interracial Relationships, Relationship Satisfaction, Household Income, Income Disparity

The prevalence of interracial relationships and marriages in the U.S. has steadily increased over the last two decades. According to U.S. census data from 2000 and 2016, every U.S. state saw an increase in interracial marriages, and the total proportion of interracial marriages in the U.S. has risen from 7.4% to 10.2% (Rico et al., 2018). A large majority of Americans have begun to adopt positive attitudes towards interracial marriage. Whereas a meager 4% of Americans approved of marriage between white and non-white people in 1958, an overwhelming 87% reported their approval of interracial marriages as of 2013 (Newport, 2013).

Similarly, since national legalization in 2015, same-sex marriages have started representing an increasing proportion of marriages in the United States. As of 2021, nearly 1 million households in the U.S. were same-sex, and married couples represented 58% of these households whereas unmarried partners represented 42% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Attitudes towards same-sex marriages have also improved dramatically across the past two decades, albeit to a different extent than attitudes towards interracial marriages. While attitudes towards the latter have steadily improved since the 1950's, reaching majority approval in the 90's, positive attitudes towards same-sex marriage spiked in the early 2010's and reached majority approval in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2019). These statistics broadly refer to sexual minorities as belonging exclusively to "same-sex" relationships, however the current work seeks to broaden this classification as sexual minorities face internal and/or external stressors related to having a marginalized identity regardless of whether their relationship is same-sex. We define sexual minority relationships as any relationship that includes someone who identifies as LGBTQIA+. With this in mind, the current

work examines the relationship satisfaction of marginalized individuals, such as those who identify as a sexual minority or those in an interracial relationship. Additionally, we seek to determine how individual-level factors, such as racial identity, income level, and gender interact with these group memberships to affect relationship satisfaction.

Marginalized Identities, Relationships, and Minority Stress

Despite the increase in both prevalence and approval, interracial and sexual minority relationships continue to face unique challenges that stem from social stigmatization (Rosenthal et al., 2019). Researchers have recently categorized these challenges under the label of minority stress, a term partially derived from Allport's earlier research on group prejudice, in order to accurately describe findings related to the unique stressors that marginalized people face (Allport, 1954). Newer models of minority stress have highlighted how minority status, as well as stressors related to having a marginalized identity, overlap with individual-level factors (e.g., socioeconomic status) to produce positive or negative mental and personal health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). However, even though rates of interracial and same-sex marriage are increasing, with these kinds of couples now representing a sizeable portion of the married population, most research exploring romantic relationships continues to rely on data from white, heterosexual, intraracial couples (Wong & Penner, 2018).

Given that interracial and sexual minority relationships are both comprised of marginalized individuals that face unique problems because of social stigma, it is worth exploring which factors promote positive outcomes or success

in these types of relationships. As previously mentioned, models of minority stress argue that individual-level factors, internalized stressors, and external stressors related to having a marginalized identity coalesce to produce positive or negative mental and personal health outcomes. For example, individuals in interracial and sexual minority relationships experience greater depressive symptoms when relationship stigma comes from friends, an external stressor (Rosenthal et al., 2019). However, these models also account for individual-level factors that either improve health outcomes or serve as “buffers” that lessen the impact of negative influences. In the same study conducted by Rosenthal et al., it was found that shared egalitarian beliefs between the members of an interracial or sexual minority romantic partnership lessened the impact of other negative stressors that these couples faced.

A reliable finding related to interracial interactions that comes from a large meta-analysis examining “over 40 years of research on interracial interactions” (Toosi et al., 2012) is that racial minorities experience less negative affect during interracial reactions due to their more frequent experience with intergroup contact. Provided this finding, we sought to examine how belonging to a minority group may interact with being a part of an interracial relationship. We would expect to see that minority group members, because of their greater experience and success with intergroup interactions, will report higher relationship satisfaction when in an interracial relationship. Thus, we hypothesize that minority racial group membership (i.e., being Black) will interact with belonging to an interracial relationship to produce greater relationship satisfaction.

Income and Relationship Success

One important individual-level factor that may contribute to more successful outcomes for people in marginalized relationships is income. Prior research has found that income is an important moderating factor when it comes to relationship success. A 2012 study explored the relationship satisfaction of both low-income and high-income couples and found that stressful life events accounted for more variance in the relationship satisfaction of low-income couples as opposed to high-income couples (Maisel & Karney, 2012). Income and accrued financial resources may also act as a buffer for alleviating the problems and stressors that marginalized couples face. Following the results of a large study exploring chronic stress, McGonagle and Kessler (1990) noted that money presents itself as a “flexible and broadly useful coping resource” when it comes to dealing with chronic stressors and depressive symptoms. We would expect that income would act as a coping resource for interracial and sexual minority couples in the face of stressors related to their minority status, and having low-income will have an overall negative effect on relationship satisfaction. Therefore, we hypothe-

size that belonging to a low income relationship will be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, taking into consideration minority stress, we predict that being in a low income interracial and/or sexual minority relationship will exacerbate this negative effect on relationship satisfaction.

Although higher income is generally associated with positive relationship outcomes, some evidence suggests that it may affect the relationship success of heterosexual couples and sexual minority couples in different ways. For heterosexual couples, higher income is not always associated with greater relationship satisfaction. Amongst heterosexual married couples, higher earning women (i.e., women who earn more than their husbands) generally report higher relationship satisfaction, but men’s relationship satisfaction has been shown to decrease when their wife’s income begins to comprise a significant proportion of the couple’s earnings (Rogers & DeBoer, 2004). This finding was replicated in a later study that emphasized the role of masculine ideology and traditional gender norms; men who subscribed to these notions and earned less than their wives reported decreased relationship satisfaction as a result of this income disparity (Coughlin & Wade, 2012). Sexual minority relationships, however, are generally less restricted by traditional gender roles, and past research has shown that higher income is directly correlated with greater relationship satisfaction for both parties in these kinds of relationships (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003). Taking into account the individual-level factors of income and gender, we would expect that males in any type of relationship who make less income than their female partner will report lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Therefore, we hypothesize that male gender identity will interact with income disparity such that contributing less total income as a male will be associated with lower relationship satisfaction.

The Current Investigation

The current work aims to explore romantic relationships through the theoretical framework of minority stress. We seek to identify how social identities, intergroup relations, and individual-level factors all coalesce and interact within this framework to produce our hypothesized effects. Based on previously discussed findings, we will test three separate hypotheses.

1. Low income couples will report lower levels of relationship satisfaction relative to higher earning couples. Belonging to a marginalized relationship (i.e., interracial and/or sexual minority relationship) will exacerbate the negative effects of being low income as it relates to relationship satisfaction.

2. Minority racial group membership will interact with being in an interracial relationship such that the combination of these factors will be associated with greater relationship

satisfaction. Specifically, Black people will report higher relationship satisfaction when they are in an interracial relationship rather than an intraracial relationship.

3. Male gender identity will interact with income disparities in a romantic relationship in one of two ways. Males that contribute less proportional income to their relationship compared to their partner will report lower levels of relationship satisfaction.

Methods

To investigate the hypotheses, we used the “How Couples Meet and Stay Together 2017” dataset collected by principal investigator Michael J. Rosenfeld (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). German research institute, GfK, conducted this nationally representative study with a sample of individuals currently or previously in a relationship. The survey featured a comprehensive set of questions aimed at discovering how U.S. adults meet and maintain healthy relationships with their spouses or romantic partners. The respondents completed the survey online, and GfK provided internet access for those who did not have it readily accessible. The dataset includes feedback from 3,510 respondents. From this sample, 2,862 respondents were in a relationship at the time of data collection and 541 respondents were in a relationship that ended prior to data collection. For the following analyses, the dataset was further subset to only include respondents who were in a relationship at the time and had answered all questions of interest to the research hypotheses. Respondents who refused to answer relevant questions were excluded, resulting in a final subset of 2,808 respondents.

Participants

The subset data ($N = 2,808$) had a total of 1,391 male (49.5%) and 1,417 female respondents (50.5%). The ages ranged from 18 to 93 years old, with a mean age of 50 years. The majority of the subset respondents reported as White ($N = 2,371$; 84.4%), while the remainder reported they were Black or African American ($N = 257$; 9.15%), American Indian, Aleut, or Eskimo ($N = 104$; 3.7%), Asian or Pacific Islander ($N = 111$; 3.95%), or Other ($N = 100$; 3.56%). This includes respondents who reported identifying as more than one race. From the subset population, 447 reported being an interracial couple (15.9%) and 437 identified as a sexual minority (15.56%). A total of 112 respondents (3.99%) reported being a sexual minority interracial couple. In addition, 846 respondents were categorized as having low household income (under \$50,000; 30.1%), where 163 were low income and sexual minority (5.8%), and 160 were low income and in an interracial relationship (5.7%). Only 53 respondents were low income, sexual minority, and in an interracial relationship (1.89%). The majority of the subset reported an income disparity between individuals in a relationship

($N = 2,469$; 88%), while a smaller portion of the subset sample earned the same amount as their partner ($N = 339$; 12%).

Variables

Income variables

To operationalize the low-income variable, respondents were asked to report their current household income on a 21-point scale. Responses ranged from “less than \$5,000” to “\$250,000 or more.” To accurately represent the presented hypotheses, we converted this into a binary 2-point scale. Respondents with a household income of less than \$50,000 were categorized as having low income whereas respondents with a household income greater than \$50,000 were categorized as having middle or high income. To measure income disparity, respondents were asked, “Between you and [Partner Name], who earned more in 2016.” Responses to this question included: “I earned more,” “We earned about the same amount,” “[Partner Name] earned more,” and “[Partner Name] was not working for pay.”

Sexual Minority Status

To identify respondents that belong to sexual minorities, respondents were asked “Do you consider yourself to be...” with the option of selecting either “Gay or lesbian,” “Straight, that is, not gay,” “Bisexual,” or “Something else.” Respondents whose answer was not “straight, that is, not gay” were considered a sexual minority in this study.

Interracial Relationship Status

An additional question was asked in order to determine the number of respondents currently in an interracial relationship. The question asked if the respondent and their partner were an interracial couple, to which they would select either “yes” or “no.”

Relationship Satisfaction

For the satisfaction variable, respondents were initially asked on a 5-point scale “How would you describe the quality of your relationship with your partner,” to which the answers included “excellent,” “good,” “fair,” “poor,” and “very poor.” Upon initial analysis, it was discovered that responses to this question were heavily skewed to the right, with 60% of people rating their relationship as “excellent.” Because of this disparity, we converted the variable into a binary: “excellent” versus “non-excellent,” where non-excellent included “good,” “fair,” “poor,” and “very poor.”

Results

We used the same procedure to test all three hypotheses. For each hypothesis, we built two separate logistic regression

models where each model had excellent relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable. The main model tested only the main effects, while the interaction model included interactive effects. We then tested the significance of the interaction terms using the likelihood ratio test to see if the data were more likely under the interaction model.

Low Income, Sexual Minority, and Interracial

Our first hypothesis was that being a low-income couple will be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, being a low-income interracial or a low-income sexual minority couple will have a larger negative effect on relationship satisfaction. The main model for this hypothesis included low-income, sexual minority, and interracial couple status as predictors. The interaction model tested for all potential interactions.

The proportion of variance explained by the main model¹ was significantly different from zero, McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = .0142$, $\chi^2(3) = 53.61$, $p < .001$, meaning that there was a significant association between marginalized identity and relationship satisfaction. The odds ratio of sexual minority status, $\exp(\beta) = 0.72$, $\beta = -0.329$, $SE = 0.106$, $z = -3.1$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.58, 0.89], indicates that identifying as a sexual minority decreased the odds of excellent relationship satisfaction by a factor of 0.72. Being an interracial couple was also a negative predictor of satisfaction with odds ratio of 0.75, $\exp(\beta) = 0.75$, $\beta = -0.28$, $SE = 0.105$, $z = -2.67$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [0.61, 0.93]. The odds ratio of low income status, $\exp(\beta) = 0.63$, $\beta = -0.466$, $SE = 0.084$, $z = -5.56$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.53, 0.74], indicates that the odds of excellent relationship satisfaction decreased by a factor of 0.63 if the respondent was a member of a low income household, which supports the first part of our hypothesis.

The interaction model also explained a proportion of variance that was significantly different from zero, McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = .015$, $\chi^2(7) = 57.06$, $p < .001$. All of the significant main effects remained ($p < .05$). However, none of the interaction terms produced statistically significant coefficients (the same effect remained if we omitted the three-way term from the regression equation; see Table 1 in the appendix for all coefficients and p values). The likelihood ratio test between the two models indicated that the interaction model is not significantly better, $\chi^2(4) = 3.4$, $p = .490$. Thus, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that low income has no moderating effect on excellent relationship satisfaction among sexual minority or interracial couples.

Race and Interracial

According to our second hypothesis, being a Black respondent in an interracial relationship would increase the odds of excellent satisfaction compared to being Black in an intraracial relationship.

The main model, which used identifying as Black and being in an interracial relationships as predictors, explained a non-zero amount of variance, McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = .014$, $\chi^2(2) = 52.9$, $p < .001$. The odds ratio of being black, $\exp(\beta) = 0.42$, $\beta = -0.86$, $SE = 0.135$, $z = -6.39$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.32, 0.55], and of being in an interracial relationship, $\exp(\beta) = 0.77$, $\beta = -0.258$, $SE = 0.106$, $z = -3.1$, $p = .015$, 95% CI [0.63, 0.95], indicate that these characteristics decreased the odds of excellent relationship satisfaction by factors of 0.42 and 0.77 respectively.

Based on the interaction model for this hypothesis, the coefficient of the interaction term was significantly different from zero, $\exp(\beta) = 2.07$, $\beta = 0.73$, $SE = 0.30$, $z = 2.47$, $p = .014$, 95% CI [1.16, 3.69] (see Table 2 for all coefficients and p values). In conjunction with the other coefficients, this means that for Black respondents in an interracial relationships the odds of excellent relationship satisfaction were 0.84 compared to 0.59 for Black respondents in intraracial relationships. In probabilities, this indicates that Black respondents in interracial relationships had an estimated probability of .46 of rating their relationship satisfaction as excellent compared to .37 for their counterparts in intraracial relationships (see the relationship in Figure 1). The data are more likely under the interaction model, $\chi^2(1) = 6.03$, $p = .014$, confirming the significance of the interaction term.

Gender Income Disparity

The third hypothesis tested was that male-identified individuals who earned less income than their partners report lower levels of relationship satisfaction than males who did not earn less. For the hypothesis, the main model had gender and earning less as predictors.

The variance explained by the main model was non-zero, McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = .002$, $\chi^2(2) = 6.12$, $p = .047$. Only the effect of being male was significant, $\exp(\beta) = 1.22$, $\beta = 0.199$, $SE = 0.08$, $z = 2.413$, $p = .016$, 95% CI [1.03, 1.43], indicating that identifying as male increased the odds of reporting excellent relationship satisfaction by a factor of 1.22. The odds ratio of earning less, $\exp(\beta) = 1.03$, $\beta = 0.03$, $SE = 0.08$, $z = 0.35$, $p = .726$, 95% CI [0.87, 1.21], means that earning less did not have a significant impact on the odds of relationship satisfaction in general.

From the interaction model, the interaction term of being male and earning less had a significant coefficient, $\exp(\beta) = 0.70$, $\beta = -0.36$, $SE = 0.17$, $z = -2.13$, $p = .033$, 95% CI [0.50, 0.97], (the main effect of gender remained significant with $p = .001$; see Table 3 for all coefficients and p -values). The likelihood ratio test confirmed the significance of the interaction term, $\chi^2(1) = 4.53$, $p = .033$. These results indicate that the odds of excellent relationship satisfaction for males

¹Coefficients for each of the main models are provided in text only. See Appendix A for results of the interaction models.

who earned less were 1.43 compared to the odds of 1.72 for males who did not earn less. In probabilities, males who earned less had an estimated probability of .59 of rating their relationship as excellent, while males who did not earn less had a probability of .63. Figure 2 shows this effect in the dataset.

Discussion

Despite the prevalence and increasing acceptance of marginalized romantic relationships (i.e., low income, interracial and sexual minority couples), the results of this study suggest that marginalized couples experience lower levels of relationship satisfaction compared to their non-marginalized counterparts. We found that those identifying as a sexual minority were less likely to rate their relationship quality as Excellent. The same results were found for interracial and low-income couples. These main effects are similar to past work examining how minority status overlaps with individual-level factors (Meyer, 2003). However, the interactive effects of being in a sexual minority, interracial, or low-income relationship were not significant predictors of relationship satisfaction. This implies that possessing two or more marginalized identities does not necessarily impact relationship quality differently than possessing only one of those identities. For example, those who are both a sexual minority and in a low-income relationship may not differ significantly in their relationship satisfaction compared to those belonging to solely a sexual minority or a low-income household. Though, more data on marginalized couples is necessary to confidently make these conclusions.

Our findings were also consistent with previous research suggesting that in non-romantic settings, minority racial groups had better emotional states and experiences with interracial interactions and experienced less emotional affect as a result of prior exposure, experience, and success from already being part of a marginalized identity group (Toosi et al., 2012). Building off of Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Theory and Toosi's study on minorities and emotional affect, we hypothesized that those who belong to a minority racial group would report greater relationship satisfaction in an interracial (vs. intraracial) relationship. We found that people who identified as Black and were in an interracial relationship reported greater relationship satisfaction than those who were Black and in an intraracial relationship. It is worth noting that this may be a consequence of racial group membership being associated with certain socioeconomic statuses (SES), which could in turn lead to greater life satisfaction (Barger et al., 2009). For example, this may contribute to greater relationship satisfaction such that Black people in interracial relationships with higher SES may report greater relationship satisfaction. Additionally, prior research has found that there may be an implicit association between race and social class, where being poor is related to being Black,

which may interact with relationship satisfaction reports of the respondent (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2019). For different groups of people who identify as Black, SES and parental status are also an important correlate for good relationship satisfaction, which may play a role in respondent ratings (Lincoln et al., 2008). Therefore, future research should look further into the interactions between interracial relationship satisfaction and minority racial groups, relationship satisfaction, and SES.

Lastly, our results suggest that men (but not women) who report earning less than their partners were typically less satisfied with their relationships. Because these results were tested amongst all couples—heterosexual and sexual minority—the gender of their partners is not specified. However, this finding is consistent with previous research, in which married men had lower relationship satisfaction when their wives earned a higher income and contributed more to their household earnings (Rogers & DeBoer, 2004). In line with masculinity research, these findings may have been the product of a demonstration of traditional gender roles, where men are expected to be breadwinners; inability to do so may introduce a stressor into the relationship. Conversely, women are traditionally not expected to contribute significantly to the household income, which may explain the difference in the results found (Coughlin & Wade, 2012).

However, our study has limitations. The dataset used for analyses did not have substantial responses from certain racial minorities (i.e. Hispanic, Native American), limiting the power of the study. We did not account for the gender of the respondents in two of our models and how gender disparities may impact the results obtained. Additionally, we did not consider the particular races of the individuals within an interracial relationship, aside from Black in our second hypothesis. This limits how generalizable the results are to all interracial couples and racial minorities, since it is possible for race-related power dynamics to affect relationship quality. Lastly, there are multiple factors contributing to relationship satisfaction, such as duration, personal characteristics, mental maturity, religious beliefs, among others. (Tavakol et al., 2017). However, in this study we were only able to measure the effects of household income between partners, income disparities, gender in the context of income, sexual minority status, and race. A multidimensional study that accounts for how the different variables weigh against satisfaction would be valuable.

Further research on how intersections of marginalized identities impact relationships is necessary to support those couples' well-being. While the Minority Stress Model attempts to discuss how external and internal stressors interact with those with marginalized identities, there currently is not enough data to assess the dyadic interactions of minority identities in romantic relationships. Future research could focus on obtaining more data from marginalized groups like

LGBTQIA+, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American. More data from these populations would allow researchers to study particular race interracial relationships and how those interact with being a sexual minority.

The increased prevalence and acceptance of marginalized minority identities is quickly reshaping the landscape of relationships in the United States. However, minority identities continue to be underrepresented and understudied, indicating the importance and need for a better way to combine their unique experiences into a new model for relationship satisfaction that considers these different factors. With the dynamics of relationships changing in the U.S., it is crucial for us to go beyond the scope of established gender and racial norms, and shed light on how marginalized racial identities, sexual minorities, and non-traditional gender and cultural roles have begun framing the nature of relationships in modern-day America.

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Table 1*Logistic regression summary for the low income interaction model*

Variable	Logit results						
	$\exp(\beta)$	β	SE	z	p	[0.025	0.975]
constant	1.96	.67	.06	12.12	.00	1.76	2.18
sexual minority	.67	-.40	.15	-2.70	.007	.50	.90
interracial	.63	-.46	.14	-3.19	.001	.48	.84
low income	.60	-.52	.10	-5.16	.00	.49	.73
minority x income	.99	-.01	.26	-.04	.97	.60	1.64
interracial x income	1.38	.32	.26	1.27	.20	.84	2.28
minority x interracial	1.43	.36	.33	1.09	.276	.75	2.72
minority x interracial x income	.85	-.16	.52	-.30	.761	.31	2.35

Table 2*Logistic regression summary for the race-interracial interaction model*

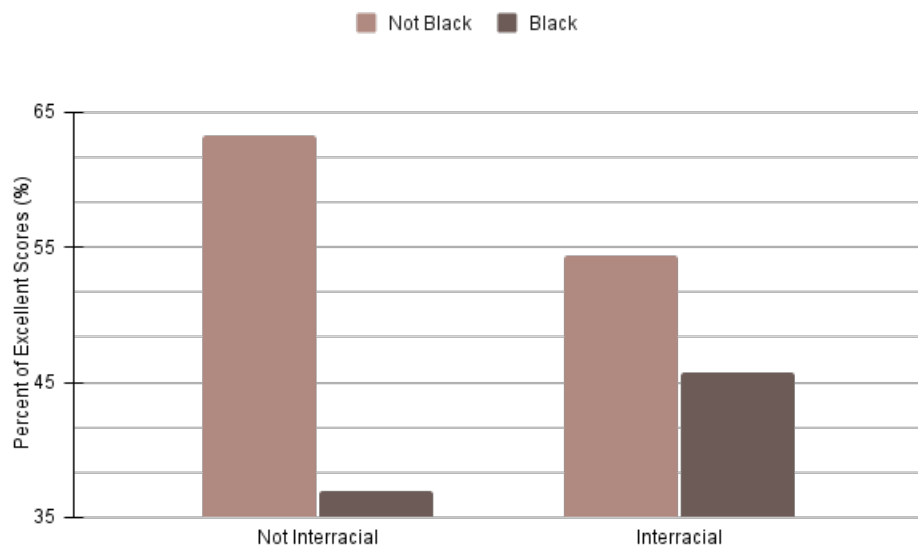
Variable	Logit results						
	$\exp(\beta)$	β	SE	z	p	[0.025	0.975]
constant	1.72	.54	.04	12.20	.00	1.58	1.87
black	.34	-1.08	.16	-6.63	.00	.25	.47
interracial	.69	-.37	.11	-3.21	.001	.25	.47
black x interracial	2.07	.73	.30	2.47	.014	1.16	3.69

Table 3*Logistic regression summary for the gender income disparity interaction model*

Variable	Logit results						
	$\exp(\beta)$	β	SE	z	p	[0.025	0.975]
constant	1.23	.21	.08	2.47	.014	1.04	1.44
male	1.40	.34	.11	3.22	.001	.50	.97
earned less	1.20	.18	.11	1.64	.101	.97	1.48
male x earned less	.70	-.36	.17	-2.13	.033	.50	.97

Figure 1

Percent of Participants reporting Excellent Satisfaction per group (Interracial and Black)

**Figure 2**

Percent of Participants reporting Excellent Satisfaction per group (Gender and Earning Less)

