

THE EFFECTS OF PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS ON PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION OF INTERRACIAL BLACK-WHITE COUPLES

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Abstract

In light of the increasing number of interracial marriages in the U.S., this study aimed to investigate the effect of couples' problem-solving skills on how discrimination experience is related to relationship satisfaction among interracial Black-White couples. A sample of 178 interracial couples (93 Black husbands-White wives and 85 Black wives-White husbands) participated in the study by completing online surveys via Qualtrics Panel. A structural equation model was utilized to test whether or not problem-solving skills could moderate the relationship between couples' experience of discrimination and relationship satisfaction. Results revealed a positive association between relationship satisfaction and problem-solving skills and a negative association between the perception of relationship satisfaction and couple discrimination. Interracial couples' problem-solving skills buffered the relationship between the experience of discrimination and relationship satisfaction. The results of the present study highlighted the importance of interracial couples' problem-solving skills in effectively addressing relationship concerns.

Keywords: *Black-white couples, discrimination, interracial couple, problem-solving skills, marital satisfaction.*

1. Introduction

Racial and ethnic diversity is rapidly increasing across the U.S., and the percentage of interracially married couples raised from 1.6 to 6.3 since 1980 (Parker et al., 2015). Although interracial marriages have become more common, they are still not widely accepted in U.S. society (Garcia et al., 2015), and much of the opposition these couples face comes from their families and the public (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006; Lewis, 2013). Support and help from family and friends can be considered vital resources for marital satisfaction. Thus, a lack of support and disapproval from family, friends, or society may increase negative interactions between partners (Genç & Baptist, 2020). As a result, experiencing discrimination due to one's partner's race can lead to lower happiness and stability in relationships among those couples who married outside their race (Baptist et al., 2019; Genç & Su, 2021). Despite the challenges mix-race couples may encounter in their daily life, it should not be assumed that these couples are less satisfying than same-race couples. Much of the research in this area suggested that partners in interracial relationships possess certain strengths. For example, interracial couples could be happier and more successful in their relationship than some intra-racial couples (Troy et al., 2006; Wong, 2009) and have stable marriages as same-race marriages (Fu & Wolfinger, 2011). Further, mix-race marriages can provide unique opportunities for learning, growth, commitment, and respect through accepting differences (Wong, 2009).

Given the fact that there is an increasing trend in interracial marriages, it is important to comprehend the relationship development skills of those couples to strengthen their marriage. When couples face challenging situations, they may tend to engage in destructive behaviors toward each other. Thus, their problem-solving skills can be considered an essential factor that affects how couples would deal with stress and interact with each other (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007). Former studies also claimed that problem-solving skills are a strong factor in relationship satisfaction (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2010). Specifically, while negative problem-solving behaviors such as denial of responsibility, blaming, disagreement, and justification of own manners resulted in declines in relationship satisfaction, positive problem-solving behaviors including constructive communication, being responsive, and active engagement in resolving problems increased marital satisfaction (Gottman, 1999). Although there is a lack of research attention on the role of problem-solving skills among couples who experience racial

discrimination, problem-solving skills, as a concrete strategy for addressing relationship problems, can be beneficial for the happiness of interracial marriages.

The literature has been largely focused on the experience of interracial couples in the past thirty years following the abolishment of anti-miscegenation laws. Although previous studies on Black-White couples found a negative association between racial discrimination and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Baptist et al., 2019; Genc & Su, 2021), the mechanism underlying this association is not fully understood. Therefore, the current study seeks to better understand the potential effects of discrimination on interracial couples' daily life by examining the role of problem-solving skills as a moderator between discrimination and relationship satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Qualtrics was used to recruit a panel of respondents to participate in the online survey based on the following criteria: being a) in an interracial (Black-White) heterosexual relationship, b) married, and c) residing in the U.S. For the current study, 178 couples were recruited. In terms of the sex-race configuration of the sample, 93 couples were in Black husband-White wife relationships while 85 couples were in White husband-Black wife relationships. Participants' relationship duration with their current partner was reported as a long-term relationship ($M = 8.99$ years, $SD = 4.57$ years). The mean age was 32.31 ($SD = 4.26$) for Black husband-White wife couples and 31.37 ($SD = 4.01$) for White husband-Black wife couples. For the Black husband-White wife couples, the Black male participants attended college with 26.9%, while 32.6% of the White wife possessed a Bachelor's degree. Regarding White husband-Black wife couples, the rate of educated participants was higher than Black husband-White wife couples. 45.9% of White males and 47.1% of Black females received bachelor's degrees.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Problem-solving. Couples' problem-solving skills were assessed using the Interactional Problem-Solving Inventory (IPSI; Lange, 1983), which is a 17-item self-report measure. The internal reliability estimate of IPSI in this study was strong, as Black ($\alpha = .81$) and White ($\alpha = .80$) participants.

2.2.2. Relationship satisfaction. Couples' relationship satisfaction was measured using the 4-item Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI-4; Funk & Rogge, 2007). The Cronbach's alpha of CSI-4 was $\alpha = .92$ for Black participants and $\alpha = .92$ for White participants for the present study, estimating high reliability.

2.2.3. Perceived experience of discrimination. Couples' perceptions of discrimination experience were measured with the 6-item self-report Midlife Development in the United States survey (MIDUS; Kessler et al., 1999), adapted by Trail et al. (2012). Cronbach's alpha revealed strong reliability, as $\alpha = .90$ for Black participants, $\alpha = .89$ for White participants.

3. Results

3.1. Normality and missingness

In order to test the hypothesized relationships among variables, several statistical analyses were performed. First, a basic normality test and missing data analysis were conducted. All variables were normally distributed with acceptable kurtosis and skewness (Finney, & Distefano, 2006). Twenty-six couples (14.6%) had missing data, although no obvious pattern of missingness was detected.

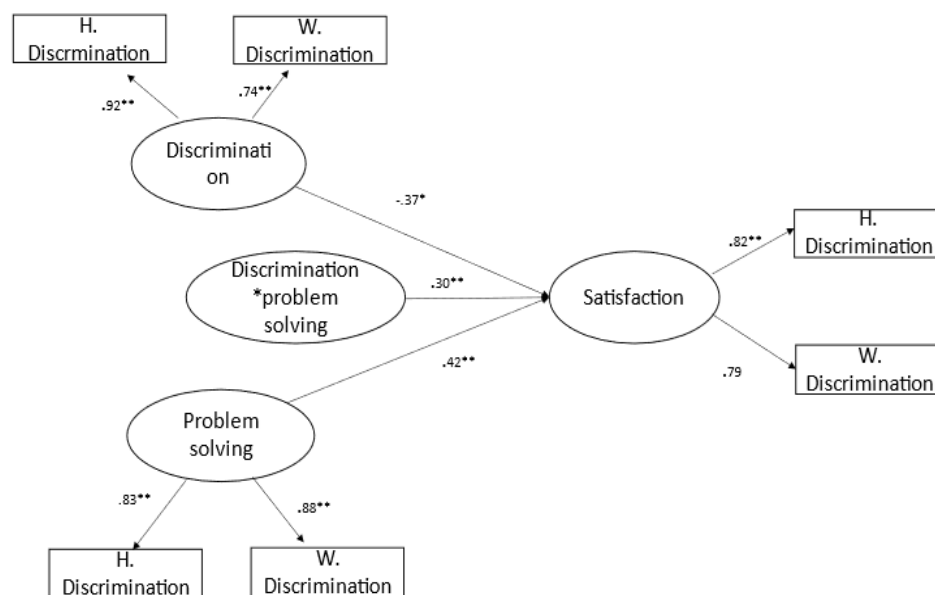
3.2. Correlation

The correlation test is used to test the degree of association between couples. In both groups (white-husband/black-wife and black husband/white wife), all three variables (couple discrimination, problem-solving, and relationship satisfaction) were positively correlated between partners significantly. In addition, the husband's problem-solving skills were positively related to the husband's relationship satisfaction, the wife's problem-solving skills, and the wife's relationship satisfaction.

3.3. Problem-Solving Skill as Moderator

A structural equation model with a moderation effect of problem-solving skills is conducted. These analyses were employed using *Mplus* 6.12 (Muthén & Muthén, 2004). Next, as depicted in figure 1, problem-solving as a latent moderator as recommended was examined. As expected, the results show a significant positive association between relationship satisfaction and problem-solving skills ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$), and a negative association between the perception of relationship satisfaction and couple discrimination ($\beta = -.37$, $p < .05$). The interaction effect of problem-solving skills and perceived discrimination was positively related to relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .30$, $p < .05$). In other words, problem-solving skills appeared to buffer the effect of perceived couple discrimination on relationship satisfaction. When including the group as a predictor in this model, it appeared that the grouping variable predicted perceived discrimination ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$).

Figure 1. Moderating model of problem-solving skills of interracial couples.



4. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore whether couples' problem-solving skills have a buffering effect on the relationship between perceived discrimination and relationship satisfaction among Black-White interracial couples. Data were gathered from 178 Black-White couples across the U.S. Overall, our results support that interracial couples who perceived discrimination from outside sources experience less satisfaction in their relationship. Relationship satisfaction of those couples was found to be positively related to problem-solving skills. Further, problem-solving skills maintain relationship satisfaction, even for couples who have experienced discrimination.

A noteworthy finding from this study was the positive association between relationship satisfaction and problem-solving skills. Specifically, it has revealed that the problem-solving skills of interracial couples had a positive effect on relationship satisfaction. One interpretation of this finding is that when coping with external challenges, it is important for interracial couples to be more open, tolerant, patient, understanding, and supportive of one another (Baptist et al., 2019; Genc & Su, 2021).

Finally, the most striking finding from this study is that problem-solving skills moderated the relationship between discrimination and relationship satisfaction. It is plausible that during the coping stage (Foeman & Nance, 2002), problem-solving skills can be used strategically by partners experiencing discrimination to manage the challenges and protect themselves. The experience of discrimination can bring a new opportunity to couples' relationships to gain insight into their own cultural differences and develop strategies to deal with challenging experiences in daily life that may strengthen their relationship and increase satisfaction.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

Although this study offers a contribution to the current literature on interracial couples, and this is one of the few studies that explore the relationship between perceived discrimination, problem-solving skills of interracial couples, and their marital satisfaction, it has some limitations that prompt future directions. The primary limitation of the current study is that the data is cross-sectional, which imposes limits on interpreting and making claims regarding the directionality of the associations found. Further research with longitudinal data would be helpful in explaining the cause-and-effect relationship. Another limitation of these findings is the lack of exploration regarding the interaction effect of gender and race. In future research on interracial relationships, researchers should provide a better understanding as to how such gender roles and/or racial identity can benefit or hinder those couples' relationship satisfaction.

5. Conclusion

This study provides an initial sight at the connection between perceived discrimination and relationship satisfaction in Black-White interracial marriages. Results indicated that higher levels of perceived discrimination were related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction in general. Also, higher levels of problem-solving skills were related to higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the results of the present study claim that problem-solving skills buffer the relationship between perceived discrimination and satisfaction.

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