

RELATIONSHIP AWARENESS, COLLECTIVISM AND RESPONSE TO ADVICE IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN COUPLES

by

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(Under the Direction of Steven R. H. Beach)

ABSTRACT

In the current study, the effect of manipulated feelings of closeness on the self-evaluation maintenance processes of European American and African American couples was examined. 60 European American and 79 African American married couples were induced to think of ways in which they worked as a team or ways in which they each had unique strengths to enhance relationship awareness. Results suggest that enhancing feelings of teamwork had a greater impact on response to advice in African American men, while African American women responded more positively to advice after thinking of their unique strengths. Overall, African Americans viewed advice as being more helpful than European Americans. Results are discussed in terms of cultural differences in collectivism, as well as implications for improving response to advice as a mechanism to enhance relationship functioning.

INDEX WORDS: Blacks, Whites, Marriage, Social Support, Collectivism, Advice

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

While the amount of psychological research on African Americans has increased dramatically over the past 30 years, African American couples remain a woefully understudied population. In many cases, including in the context of marital therapy, African American couples are assumed to be functionally equivalent to European American couples. Contrary to this assumption, however, many studies have cited significant areas of difference in African American couples, including increased involvement of extended family in the marital relationship (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004), experience of different levels of positive and negative marital behavior (Broman, 2005), and even a higher rate of marital disruption (Sweeney & Phillips, 2004). As marital treatment manuals are expanded and therapy techniques become more sensitive to the needs of a wide variety of couples, it is increasingly important to take into account the distinct cultural features of African American families and of families from other understudied populations. Engaging in a direct examination of basic marital processes and the way these processes are similar and different as a function of different couples' backgrounds could allow for culturally sensitive variations of empirically supported marital therapy packages, as well as enhancing our understanding of populations that are often overlooked in marital research.

Many of the distinct features of African American relationships are hypothesized to originate from the endorsement of collectivist values by African American families (e.g., Utsey, Adams, & Bolden, 2000). This collectivistic perspective places greater emphasis on family

cohesion, kinship communities, and oneness than the individualism valued in a more Eurocentric perspective (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Gaines et al., 1997; Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001).

African American individuals endorsing an African worldview, then, would tend to consider the greater interests of the community before their own personal or individual needs (see Marcus & Kitayama, 1991, for a discussion). This suggests that African American couples may view their romantic relationships and events within that relationship differently than Caucasian couples.

Particularly, African Americans may tend to think of themselves as part of a couple before considering themselves as individuals, which might have an impact on a number of basic marital processes.

One basic marital process that has been the focus of a great body of marital literature has been the reception and provision of social support. Understanding the effects of social support in maintenance and enhancement of marital satisfaction is of critical importance, both theoretically (e.g., Acitelli, 1996; Cutrona, 1994, 1996; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) and in the practical development of marital interventions (e.g., Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998). There has been some indication that the act of receiving and providing social support differs as a result of racial and cultural norms. African Americans, for example, are more likely than European Americans to seek social support from informal networks of friends in addition to support within the marital relationship (Taylor, Chatters, Hardison & Riley, 2001). However, specific mechanisms of action involved in the interpretation of supportive offerings have not yet been fully explicated. Specifically, in viewing provision and reception of social support from the context of marital intervention development, understanding the ways in which supportive processes can be manipulated is of primary relevance and as of yet remains unexplored in the literature.

To that end, the current study seeks to explicate the mechanisms at work in reception of a specific, and complicated, element of marital social exchange: advice. Furthermore, this study examines how reception of advice may differ both as a function of race and as a function of a manipulation designed to enhance couples' feelings of similarity or "coupleness" (in keeping with the African worldview briefly discussed earlier), or their feelings of uniqueness (in keeping with a more Eurocentric worldview). First, we will look at the role of social support in general and advice in specific in the context of the marital relationship. We will then examine a model of social comparison, Self Evaluation Maintenance (SEM; Tesser, 1988), as a means of explicating situations in which advice might be easier or harder to receive. Similarity and uniqueness will be discussed in terms of their interaction with the construct of relationship awareness. Finally, we will examine the unique features of African American marital relationships and the way the current study sought to experimentally manipulate reception of advice from the context of a collectivistic perspective.

Social support and advice.

Feeling supported by one's partner is a powerful predictor both of reported marital satisfaction and of the longevity of marriage (Cutrona, 2004), and examining the provision of effective relationship support appears critical for understanding relationship stability (Bradbury, 2000). While focusing on support could thus allow researchers to gain predictive power in the study of close relationships, partners within a marriage view social support as important as well. Married individuals often name spouses as the person most likely to offer them support in times of need (Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Berg-Cross, 1974), and, in general, spouses are the most likely providers of almost all types of supportive behaviors among married persons (Beach, Martin & Blum, 1993). Support offered in the context of a married relationship, furthermore, is related to

mental and physical health benefits more strongly and uniquely than support offered in the context of relationships in general (Brown & Harris, 1978; Lin, Dean, & Ensel, 1981; Rogers, 1987).

Some forms of social support, such as non-directive, emotion focused support, consistently predict lower levels of marital distress (Holahan & Moos, 1987) and more positive emotional outcomes (Vanfossen, 1986). In contrast, advice, a particularly important and common form of social support, has been shown in some cases to predict more rather than less depressive symptoms (Finch et al., 1997) and lower ratings of marital support satisfaction (Dehle & Landers, 2005). However, in other cases, advice has been shown to enhance marital satisfaction, particularly in addressing and coping with stressful life events (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). Advice thus appears to have the potential to be helpful, but also to threaten in certain contexts. This potential could prove problematic, as spouses tend to offer advice to one another in difficult situations more readily than any other type of supportive comment (Gupta, Coyne, & Beach, 2003). Husbands, in particular, tend to utilize advice more often than the various forms of non-directive support when asked to provide support to their wives (Markman, Floyd, & Stanley, 1988). If this advice was offered in a context where it could be received as threatening, it could lead to reduced marital satisfaction and negative marital outcomes.

Understanding negative responses to advice means understanding the various contexts in which advice can be offered. For example, when offered directive support (e.g., advice) in a situation where non-directive support is desired, spouses tend to respond to the support more negatively (Cutrona, Cohen, & Ingram, 1990). Spouses' expectations therefore play a role in their responses to offers of advice. The recipient's level of self-esteem may also play a role in responding to advice. Those who score highest on measures of self-esteem have the most

difficult time accepting offers of assistance (Nadler, 1986), perhaps due to the fact that accepting assistance (including offers of advice) implies that the recipient is unable to deal with the situation by him or herself. This threatens self-esteem (Fisher, Nadler & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982).

The potential of advice to threaten self-esteem is readily understandable from the perspective of models that highlight the social comparison inherent in the interplay of self-definition and social provisions (e.g., Blanton, 2001; Exline & Lobel, 1999; King et al., 1998; Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995; Wood et al., 1996). One such model is the Self Evaluation Maintenance model (SEM; Tesser, 1988). The SEM model suggests that advice will be more poorly received when it interacts with an individual's self-definitional context. That is, when advice is offered in an area of high self-importance to the partner being advised, it will more likely engender a threat to self-esteem and a negative reaction. This places reception and provision of social support in general and advice in particular into a tangible framework in which it can be studied and experimentally manipulated.

Self-Evaluation Maintenance.

SEM is a theoretical structure for understanding an individual's response to interpersonal events. It predicts, most fundamentally, "social comparison can lead to a threat to self-evaluation and social reflection can lead to a boost in self-evaluation" (Tesser, 1991, p. 115). Whether self-evaluations are boosted or threatened by a particular interpersonal event depends on a multitude of situational factors, including the relevance of the event to one's self-concept and how close one feels to the other in the situation. The two processes that drive change in and maintenance of self-evaluations are social comparison and social reflection. Social comparison (C-; Willis, 1981) produces a threat to self-evaluation through unfavorable comparisons to the

accomplishments of others in the social environment. This leads most often to a reduced sense of self and residual negative affect (Tesser & Collins, 1988). Social reflection (R+; Cialdini et al., 1976) boosts self-evaluation by permitting an individual to “bask in the reflected glory” of the accomplishments of others in the social environment. This can lead to an enhanced sense of self and increased positive affect (Tesser & Collins, 1988). The primary basis of comparison in the SEM model is outperformance; being “outperformed” by another in the social environment prompts examination of the self and initiates a process either of comparison or reflection.

Whether the self is diminished (through negative comparison) or enhanced (through positive reflection) by an interpersonal event depends on specific elements of the social context in which the event occurs. Two of the most important of these elements are self-relevance of the performance area and perceived closeness to the outperforming other. Self-relevance is defined as the degree to which the performance area relates to one’s sense of self (Beach et al., 1998). That is, the more one feels that performing well in a particular area is important for him- or herself, or the more he or she feels like an expert in the area, the more self-relevant the area becomes. Relevance to self-definition influences response to feedback about personal performance in an area (e.g., Tesser, 1988), as well as the salience of self-evaluations following an outperformance (e.g. Pleban & Tesser, 1981; Pilkington, Tesser & Stephens, 1989). In general, the more highly self-relevant a performance area is to an individual’s self-perception, the more likely it is that being outperformed in that area will trigger a social comparison and a negative self-evaluation. Being outperformed in an area low in self-relevance, by contrast, will likely trigger a social reflection and a positive self-evaluation. Because individuals attend more closely to negative experiences than to positive experiences, however, the effects of negative

social comparison processes may be more visible than positive social reflection processes in most situations.

One situation in which individuals may attend more closely to positive reflection experiences is in the event of an outperformance by a “close” other (Beach, Tesser, Fincham, Jones, Johnson, & Whitaker, 1998). Perception of closeness to an outperforming other modulates self-evaluation in two primary ways. First, in romantic relationships, an extension of the SEM model predicts empathic effects as well as direct effects of reflection and comparison for each member of the dyad in the event of an outperformance (Beach, Tesser, & Mendolia, 1996). Because individuals in romantic relationships are emotionally invested in their partners and respond empathically to the positive affect (from R+) or negative affect (from C-) that results when their partners undergo a social event, they should experience a complex emotion in response to comparisons with the partner. For example, in the event of being outperformed in an area of low-relevance by a romantic partner, an individual would be expected to experience an enhanced reflection effect, as he or she would experience a positive social reflection as well as empathically responding to the positive affect his or her partner would experience as a result of social success. Second, SEM processes are stronger in general for close others than for strangers; individuals feel worse when friends or loved ones outperform them in areas of high self-relevance, and better when outperformed by close others in areas of low self-relevance (Beach et al., 1998).

The term “outperformance” evokes images of achieving a high score in a game or winning some sort of pitched contest, and begs the question: how often does outperformance really occur in a marital relationship? However, outperformance need not always be conceptualized as a concretely higher score in a competitive game. In most social situations,

outperformance is far less tangible, involving a wide range of interactions in which another person seems more accomplished, more capable, or more knowledgeable than the self.

Receiving advice from one's partner is a common marital and relationship event which, because it implies that the partner knows more than the self, can be examined as a specific form of outperformance (Willis, 1990).

As a type of outperformance falling within the framework of SEM, advice should elicit either social comparison or social reflection based on self-relevance of the topic area and perceived closeness to the advisor. Offers of advice in areas of high self-relevance should be viewed more negatively, threatening self-esteem and inciting a negative self-evaluation. Offers of advice in areas of low self-relevance might be viewed more favorably, and could even result in a positive identification with the advisor (R+). This may be particularly true when individuals are already identified with the advisor, as in a romantic relationship. Empathic response to the partner should also moderate the impact of advice, enhancing both positive social reflection and negative social comparison processes when advice is offered in a marital or relationship context.

Relationship Awareness.

The application of SEM to romantic relationships makes it clear that manipulating aspects of marital interaction, including relevance of performance area and closeness to the outperforming other, should have a number of systematic effects on response to advice. Another aspect of social interaction that seems open to manipulation is relationship awareness.

Awareness of one's relationship involves attending to patterns of interaction in the partnership, such as exchanging personal disclosures, sharing intimate moments, and engaging in "relationship talk" (Acitelli, 1988). It also includes the degree to which an individual tends to think of him- or herself first as a member of a couple or as an individual, as well as the extent to

which each partner makes comparisons and contrasts to the other (Acitelli, 2002). The construct of relationship awareness thus provides a context in which specific cognitions about a relationship can be examined.

The advantages and disadvantages of feeling similar to or unique from one's romantic partner have long been debated in the literature, even outside of research directly addressing the construct of relationship awareness (e.g., Winch, 1958; Zenter, 2005). Most studies have shown that similarity predicts better overall results in terms of marital satisfaction, but there have been a few notable exceptions to this rule (e.g., Beach, Tesser, & Fincham, 1996; Campbell, 1980). For example, newlyweds have been shown to evidence marked similarity in terms of attitudes (Luo & Klohnen, 2005), and many marital interventions focus on the couple as a team in trying to solve problems, thus enhancing feelings of similarity. However, for some couples, dissimilarity in high-priority attitudes is correlated with higher levels of emotional closeness (Duyssen & Teske, 1993). This suggests that some couples experience better emotional outcomes when thinking of themselves as unique individuals in the relationship, maintaining awareness of their own personal attitudes, needs and strengths.

Tesser et al. (1998) manipulated levels of relationship awareness and cognition by using a narrative prompt designed to enhance feelings of similarity ("couplehood") and uniqueness (individuality) in couples. Tesser conceptualized this manipulation as eliciting two different types of relationship awareness, with the similarity focus increasing awareness of the couple as a unit and the uniqueness focus increasing awareness of the individual's role within the couple. Individuals who had been manipulated to feel more similar to their partner reported more positive affect initially, but later responded to feedback saying their partner had outperformed them on a measure of trivia knowledge with the same level of defensiveness as participants in a

control condition. Those who had been manipulated to feel more unique from their partners displayed less positive affect and greater cognitive effort in attempting to address the apparent relationship differences, but they later responded to outperformance feedback with less defensiveness than the control group. Tesser hypothesized that this difference arose because the focus on similarity produced a rather “vacuous” and uncritical sense of positivity in the relationship, which quickly crumbled in the face of adversity (i.e., negative social comparison). Focusing on uniqueness, however, gave romantic partners the opportunity to consider their differences on a deeper cognitive level, and so they were better prepared to receive outperformance feedback.

Another possible interpretation of this somewhat surprising statement about the protective nature of uniqueness in relationships would be to examine Tesser’s findings from the perspective of individualistic (Western) versus collectivistic (Eastern or African) worldviews. Tesser’s sample was largely European American, and so perhaps the focus on uniqueness (individual strengths) was more in line with cultural norms (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In a sample from a different ethnic or racial background, it is unclear whether focusing on similarity or uniqueness would predict a better response to negative social comparison.

Given the necessity both of finding relationship factors that modulate positive provision and reception of social support and of devising culturally sensitive recommendations for marital therapists, it seems critical to determine the mechanisms at work in reception of advice for couples of different backgrounds. As Tesser et al. (1998) found, couples who choose to focus on uniqueness may have a very different response to negative social comparison information (such as advice in an area of high self-relevance) than couples who focus on similarity. Of particular interest, then, is the application of the constructs of similarity and uniqueness to ethnically

diverse couples. As African American couples tend to espouse different beliefs about relationships and relationship roles than European American couples, it may not always be the case that focusing on uniqueness (as opposed to similarity) will most positively influence their response to negative social comparisons.

Gender, Ethnicity and Self-Evaluation Maintenance.

At the creation of the SEM model, it was believed to be a universal mechanism, operating consistently for anyone, in any condition. However, research has suggested gender differences in SEM processes of at least modest importance (e.g., Beach et al., 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Conceptually, such differences are understandable from the perspective of the gender gap related to interdependent vs. independent self-construals (Cross & Madson, 1997). Individuals with socially constructed self-concepts that emphasize the importance of independence should respond to self-esteem threat by engaging in behavior designed to display their abilities or assert dominance (Maccoby, 1990). As males in Western cultures tend to have independence-focused self-concepts (Markus & Kitayama, 1994), they respond more warily to offers of assistance in general and offers of advice in specific. In addition, men report feeling less positive affect than their female significant others in response to advice in a high-relevance category (Beach et al., 2006). This may again result from the increased salience of any negative self-evaluation that calls into question the independence-focused male self-concept.

Relevance of performance dimension, manipulated sense of closeness and gender effects have all been shown to influence perception of advice as threatening (producing negative self-evaluation) or helpful (producing positive self-evaluation). To date, however, little work has been done on the role of ethnicity and cultural background in SEM processes. Heine (2001), in one of the few studies to date which examined multicultural issues in SEM, showed a difference

in SEM processes between Japanese and Canadian University students. Receiving negative (failure) feedback on a creative writing task, Canadian students bolstered their self-evaluation by discrediting the feedback and compensating in another relevant area, whereas Japanese students responded to the feedback and showed evidence of a reverse compensatory self-enhancement (minimizing their proficiency in other self-relevant areas). It seems likely that these ethnic differences result from the more interdependent self-concepts espoused by those raised in Asian cultures. Those raised in cultures with different forms of self-construal may have quite different responses to self-evaluation threat.

While no studies to date have examined the particular application of self-evaluation maintenance to African American individuals as compared to European Americans, there has been some previous research done on the unique aspects of African American close relationships. First, egalitarianism is an important feature of many African American belief structures. African American men are likely to hold egalitarian views about gender roles in relationships, possibly due to the importance of women's wages to the functioning of many African American families (Hunter & Sellers, 1998). While African American men are likely to support female equality in the economic sphere, however, men display contradictory attitudes regarding gender equity in the home (Hunter & Davis, 1992). African American men endorse the importance of sharing the burden of housework with their wives, while at the same time believing that a man should be the patriarch of the family. Both men and women in African American couples endorse the belief that a husband should be strong, independent, and able to support his household (Cutrona, Russell & Abraham, 2003).

In addition to these egalitarian and somewhat patriarchal beliefs, African American couples espousing an African worldview would tend to take a more collectivistic approach to

marital events (e.g., Dion & Dion, 1996; Rini, Schetter, Hobel, Glynn, & Sandman, 2006). That is, they would consider the needs of the couple before their own individual needs, potentially even in conflictual situations. Individuals from collectivist cultures also seek out social support to a greater degree than individuals from a more traditionally “Western” culture. In particular, collectivistic individuals are more likely to solicit advice from friends and family members when confronting a decision (Triandis, 1995). This may mean that advice is a more acceptable element of social exchange for individuals espousing collectivist views, including African Americans.

To date, there is no empirical research directly exploring cultural or ethnic influences on SEM strategies in couples, and few studies examining the impact of SEM with an African American sample. The current study sought to fill this void in the field by examining SEM processes in a sample of African American and European American married couples. The goal was to show that response to advice could be manipulated in a culturally sensitive way through a focus on relationship awareness. Three hypotheses were proposed: 1) African American individuals should score higher than European American individuals on a measure of collectivism, 2) African Americans should respond to advice more positively than European Americans prior to introduction of the experimental manipulation, and 3) African American men should respond better to advice when asked to focus on areas of similarity in their relationships, whereas African American women should respond better to advice when asked to focus on areas of uniqueness.

The first hypothesis followed from the findings of Gaines et al. (1997) and Coon and Kimmelmeier (2001), who showed that African Americans espouse a more collectivistic perspective than European Americans, which may result in differences in processing marital

events. In the second hypothesis, due to the differences between European American and African American couples in level of collectivism, it is expected that African Americans will feel less threatened by offers of advice from their spouses, and may actually seek out advice as a helpful form of social support when confronting a relationship problem. Finally, the third hypothesis explored the degree to which manipulating relationship awareness (either by emphasizing similarity or uniqueness) could moderate the impact of advice on affective response in each of the samples. Due to the collectivistic views espoused by African American individuals, it was expected that focusing on areas of similarity would have a greater effect on reception of advice for African American couples. Unlike the pattern of effects shown in a predominantly European American sample (Tesser et al., 1998), African Americans may find the uniqueness condition less effective at enhancing their ability to confront stressful relationship events, and hence less effective at moderating response to advice. This may be particularly true for African American men, who endorse more egalitarian attitudes toward relationship processes in general. Therefore, African American men should have a more positive response to advice in the similarity condition than in the uniqueness condition, as shown by more positive ratings of the helpfulness of advice received from their partners. African American women, on the other hand, should show a less positive response than African American men to advice in the similarity condition.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants. 79 African American and 60 European American couples were recruited for this study. Callers at the Family Research Center at the University of Georgia recruited 45 African American couples from rural areas surrounding Athens, Georgia. Initial contact was made by telephone call, during which interest in the project was ascertained and an appointment time was scheduled. Callers at the Survey Research Center recruited 34 African American couples and 60 European American couples from the urban Athens area. Initial contact was made by telephone and followed a format similar to that used by the Family Research Center. For the African American sample, only legally married couples wherein both partners identified as African American qualified for the study. For the European American sample, only legally married couples wherein both partners identified as European American qualified for the study. The two groups did not differ significantly on age (European American mean = 41.08, African American mean = 42.61) or number of years married (European American mean = 12.91, African American mean = 12.50). They did differ significantly on level of education, as 33.3% of the European American sample had graduated from college and another 31.7% had done post-graduate work, while 31.6% of the African American sample had completed some college and another 30.4% had completed high school. They also differed in number of children, with the European American sample reporting a mode of 2 children and a mean of 1.68, and the African American sample also reporting a mode of 2 children but a mean of 2.64. In the European American sample, 5.8% made less than \$30,000 a year, while 43.3% made more than \$70,000; in

the African American sample, 31.6% made less than \$30,000 a year, while 27.2% made more than \$70,000. Participants received \$25 for each session.

Measures. Collectivism was measured using an instrument developed by Triandis (1995) that separates vertical collectivism (VC) and horizontal collectivism (HC) (see also Singelis, Triandis, Bahwuk & Gelfand, 1995). Vertical collectivism relates to the degree to which one sees oneself as part of the larger social group and accepts inequalities in that group; it was measured by 8 items, including, “I hate to disagree with others.” Horizontal collectivism relates to the degree to which one views all members of the social group as similar and equal; it was measured by 8 items, including, “I like sharing things with my neighbors.” As both concepts are fundamental to understanding collectivism, items from both scales were averaged to produce an overall measure of collectivism.

The instrument used also measured vertical (VI) and horizontal individualism (HI) using items that assessed competitiveness and autonomy. Following Gaines et al. (1997), no significant differences between the races on individualism were expected.

Procedure. The study took place over two sessions. When participants arrived for the first session, they read over and signed a consent form detailing expectations for the experiment. They were taken into separate rooms and given a battery of paper-and-pencil questionnaires to complete, which included the collectivism measure. The husband and wife were then asked separately to generate four broad areas that were problems in their relationship, with the further injunction that two of these areas should be ones in which the individual (either the husband or the wife) felt more expertise (i.e., that were highly self-relevant), and that two should be ones in which the individual felt that his or her partner was more expert (i.e., of low self-relevance). Following generation of the broad problem areas, specific problems in the relationship were

elicited, and the husband and wife were instructed to generate problems that were realistic, but that did not directly involve the spouse as a part of the problem. The specific problems were standardized for length and exchanged between the partners. Both husband and wife were asked to come up with as many pieces of direct advice related to the first of their partner's problem areas as possible. They were then asked to generate as many pieces of non-directive support for the problem area as possible. This process was repeated for both the first high relevance and the first low relevance problem area. Next, the participants were asked to rate the advice and support they had generated themselves on the dimensions of how helpful their partner would find the statements, how comfortable their partner would feel while hearing them, and how much emotional impact the advice would have on their partner. After these self-ratings were collected, the pieces of advice and support were exchanged and the experimenter read the partners' advice and support statements and asked participants to rate each of their partners' statements on the same dimensions: how helpful it was, how comfortable they felt while hearing it, and how much emotional impact it had.

The second session consisted of another battery of questionnaires, administered after the husband and wife had been separated into different rooms. The experimental manipulation of relationship awareness was then introduced. Participants were asked either to list ways in which they and their partners functioned as a "team" in the relationship (similarity focus), or to list ways in which they and their partners functioned as "individuals" in the relationship (uniqueness focus). The experimenter read the participants the second of the high and low relevance problem areas generated in the previous session. As in Session 1, the husband and wife generated as many pieces of advice and support as they could for each problem area and rated their own advice on the three dimensions (helpfulness, comfort, emotional impact) described earlier.

Advice and support was then exchanged and the husband and wife rated their partner's advice and support, again using the same three dimensions. Following completion of the ratings, partners completed another series of questionnaires, then were reunited and fully debriefed.

After each session, couples were also given a positive mood induction task, wherein they were asked to list positive features about their partner and about the relationship in general. This was designed to offset any negative affect resulting from receiving threatening or hurtful advice.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 1 predicted that African American individuals should score higher than European American individuals on a measure of collectivism. The means for each racial group on the measure of collectivism were compared using a t-test. As predicted, African Americans scored significantly higher on the measure, $t(276) = -2.546$, $p < .01$. Differences between the sexes by racial group were assessed using a 2 (male vs. female) x 2 (African American vs. European American) ANOVA. No comparisons involving gender were significant. (See Table 2.)

The means for each racial group on the individualism scale were then compared using a t-test. No difference was found between African Americans and European Americans on individualism. A significant difference was found when comparing the means for individualism for each sex using a t-test. Men scored significantly higher on individualism than women, $t(276) = 2.14$, $p < .03$.

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 2 predicted that African Americans should respond to advice more positively than European Americans prior to introduction of the experimental manipulation. In keeping with the recommendation of Kenny and Judd (1986), the marital dyad was treated as the unit of analysis in all tests of this study's hypotheses. This was done in an attempt to address the potential non-independence of data obtained from partners in a marital relationship (see also Gottman, 1982; Teachman, Carver, & Day, 1995; and Thompson & Williams, 1982). Thus, differences in response to advice during the first session were assessed

using a repeated measures ANOVA, with gender and level of relevance treated as within-subjects variables and racial group treated as between-subjects. The final model was a 2 (group: African American vs. European American) x 2 (gender: male vs. female) x 2 (relevance: high vs. low) ANOVA. The dependent variable was the average of husbands' and wives' ratings of the helpfulness of all pieces of direct advice offered by their partners for each problem. The main effects of group and gender were both significant, $F(1, 137) = 44.86, p < .001$ and $F(1, 137) = 5.36, p = .02$, respectively. There was also a significant interaction of relevance, gender and group, $F(1, 137) = 4.98, p = .03$ (see Figure 1). Overall, African Americans rated advice offered by their spouses as more helpful, relative to European Americans' ratings. Men rated advice offered by their wives as more helpful, relative to wives' ratings of their husbands' advice. The interaction of relevance, gender and group was driven by the fact that European American men rated low relevance advice as more helpful than high relevance advice, $t(118) = -1.96, p = .05$, and their ratings for low relevance advice were higher than those of European American women, $t(118) = 2.56, p = .01$ and African American men, $t(137) = -2.15, p = .03$. African American men, by contrast, rated high relevance advice as more helpful than European American men, $t(137) = -5.19, p < .001$. As response to advice in the first session was not significantly correlated with response to advice in the second session for either European (high relevance advice: $r = .16, p = .09$, low relevance advice: $r = .05, p = .61$) or African Americans (high relevance advice: $r = .11, p = .35$, low relevance advice: $r = -.11, p = .34$), helpfulness ratings were not used as covariates in later ANOVAs.

Hypothesis 3. Hypothesis 3 predicted that African American couples should respond better to advice when asked to focus on areas of similarity in their relationships. Differences in ratings of advice following the similarity or uniqueness manipulation were assessed using a 2

(group: African American vs. European American) x 2 (gender: male vs. female) x 2 (condition: similarity vs. uniqueness) x 2 (relevance: high vs. low) repeated measures ANOVA, again with gender and relevance treated as within-subjects factors and group and condition treated as between-subjects factors. The interaction of racial group by gender by condition by relevance was significant, $F(1, 135) = 5.77, p = .02$. This three-way interaction qualified a significant two-way interaction of racial group by relevance, $F(1, 135) = 16.13, p < .001$, and a significant interaction of sex by condition, $F(1, 135) = 4.54, p = .04$, as shown in Figure 2. There was also a significant main effect of group, $F(1, 135) = 5.49, p = .02$, with African Americans again responding to advice more positively than European Americans.

Follow-up analyses revealed that the two-way interaction of racial group by relevance was driven by the more positive response of African American individuals to high-relevance advice, $t(276) = -4.82, p < .001$. African Americans, compared to European Americans, view advice in a high-relevance problem area as more helpful, whereas European Americans respond more positively to less self-relevant advice. The two-way interaction of sex by condition was driven by the differential responses of African American men and women, as discussed below.

Having explicated the interactions for the sample as a whole, ANOVAs were run to explore differences within each racial group. Ratings of helpfulness for the European American sample were subjected to a 2 (gender: male vs. female) x 2 (condition: similarity vs. uniqueness) x 2 (relevance: high vs. low) ANOVA. Gender and relevance were treated as within-subjects factors and condition was treated as a between-subjects factor. Relevance emerged as a significant main effect, $F(1, 58) = 9.53, p = .003$, with high relevance advice rated as less helpful than low relevance advice. This is in keeping with the expectation in the SEM model that high relevance outperformance produces a more negative response than low relevance

outperformance. No other main effects or interactions were significant. Most notably, no significant differences were noted for the European American sample between the groups exposed to the similarity versus the uniqueness focus.

Ratings of helpfulness for the African American sample were similarly subjected to a 2 (gender: male vs. female) x 2 (condition: similarity vs. uniqueness) x 2 (relevance: high vs. low) ANOVA. Gender and relevance were treated as within-subjects factors and condition was treated as a between-subjects factor. The African American subsample displayed a main effect of relevance, $F(1, 77) = 6.87, p = .01$, wherein low relevance advice was rated as less helpful than high relevance advice. A significant interaction of gender by condition by relevance emerged as well, $F(1, 77) = 7.415, p = .008$. Of interest, however, is the significant interaction of gender by condition, $F(1, 77) = 9.42, p = .003$, as shown in Figure 4. African American males rated advice as more helpful when asked to focus on areas of similarity in their marriage, as predicted by Hypothesis 3. African American females, on the other hand, rated advice as more helpful overall when asked to focus on their own unique strengths.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The results of the current study indicate that manipulation of relationship awareness may have a buffering impact on response to advice in some situations. Advice from one's partner can initiate a wide range of cognitive and affectual processes, which in certain cases may result in advice being viewed as less helpful and even harmful (Dehle & Landers, 2005). Examining response to advice from the framework of the Self-Evaluation Maintenance model while considering ethnic differences and manipulating relationship awareness has specified some of the cases in which advice may be viewed as more helpful or more harmful.

The European American sample in this study remained relatively inert in their response to advice. Their ratings of helpfulness following the similarity and uniqueness manipulation showed that both men and women in this sample viewed high relevance advice as less helpful. In addition, there is some indication that relationship awareness may affect interpretation of advice. While no effects involving condition were significant in this sample, there was a non-significant trend toward a uniqueness focus improving response to advice for European Americans (see Figure 3). With a different sample, future studies involving European American couples may show results that mirror the findings of Tesser et al. (1998) more closely. This would imply that when facilitating reception of advice in European American couples, it might be best to elicit contrasts and enhance cognitive engagement with differences in the relationship, so as to buffer both partners from the negative impact of receiving high-relevance advice.

The primary focus of this paper was on developing culturally sensitive interventions for basic marital processes, looking specifically at the unique needs of African American couples. African Americans responded to advice more positively than European Americans before any experimental manipulation was introduced. With the introduction of the relationship awareness manipulation, African Americans showed a differential response by sex. African American men responded to advice more positively following a focus on similarity; that is, when asked to write about ways in which they and their wives acted as a team. African American women, on the other hand, responded to advice more positively following a focus on uniqueness; that is, when asked to write about areas in which they had unique strengths and generally acted as the “expert.”

Should there be racial or ethnic differences in responding to negative social comparison, including advice? The Self-Evaluation Maintenance model would say that all ethnic groups should respond to self-evaluation threat similarly (Tesser, 1988). However, differences in response to social comparison are understandable from the perspective of cultural differences in collectivism. African Americans in this sample endorsed a more collectivistic perspective than European Americans, replicating a finding in previous cross-cultural work (e.g., Gaines et al., 1997, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001). One of the core features of a collectivist perspective is a desire to seek advice from members of one’s social group (Triandis, 1995). Thus it is possible that African Americans seek out advice from their partners and friends more often than European Americans and respond more positively to the advice they receive (Hypothesis 2). This trend may apply to other forms of social comparison as well. When social comparison occurs in an area that is encompassed by the collectivist perspective (e.g., seeking advice, sharing resources, caring for kin), individuals with a collectivistic orientation may be expected to show less

evidence of negative social comparison processes than those with a more individualistic orientation.

The sex difference in African American couples may have resulted from a number of factors. Research has shown that African American men, in particular, are likely to hold egalitarian views about relationship roles (e.g., Hunter & Sellers, 1998). This may lead African American men to view their relationship as a team effort and to approach problems in the marriage from the standpoint of being “on the same side” as their wives. This could then make a manipulation designed to enhance African American men’s feelings of similarity particularly salient, as it reflects an underlying trend in African American relationships as a whole. Focusing on similarity then would buffer men’s potential negative responses to advice, as they would view advice from their wives as coming from a “teammate” as opposed to an object of negative social comparison. A focus on uniqueness, on the other hand, would result in a less positive response to advice in African American men. When asked to think of their unique strengths and then asked to respond to advice, African American men might be less likely to view the advice as coming from someone on their team, and hence, more likely to view the advice as threatening.

African American women also evidence a tendency to hold egalitarian views about their relationships (Cutrona, Russell & Abraham, 2003). However, historically and still in some cases today, African American society is viewed as being matriarchal, with family units headed by strong, self-reliant women (Lawson, 1999). Though the myth of the African American “superwoman” has largely been debunked, many authors contend that it has been internalized by African American women, leading them to feel a societal pressure to be strong, self-supporting, and in control of family affairs (e.g., Wallace, 1994; hooks, 1984). From the perspective of clinical psychology, African American women are often viewed as utilizing a greater number of

more effective coping mechanisms than African American men as they work to address the joint pressures of racism and sexism (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). This, too, can lead to a sense and an expectation of strength in the face of adversity. This may explain why African American women responded better to advice following a manipulation designed to highlight their unique strengths. Focusing on uniqueness may have made salient the ways that the African American women in this sample have overcome adversity and provided a solid foundation for their families, as well as the ways in which their unique strengths may have made the egalitarian sharing of labor in their relationships possible. Offered advice in this condition, African American women may have been more likely to view it as helpful, as coming from an equally (if uniquely) strong partner.

This study has several implications for the field of marital therapy and research. First, facilitating the reception and provision of social support is an important goal for a marital therapist (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998), regardless of the cultural background of the couples presenting to therapy. Understanding the interface between cultural values and reception and provision of support could help marital therapists to better serve couples of different backgrounds who may differ in terms of the supportive behaviors they offer and not in overall level of relationship adjustment. Taking cultural factors into account could also help explain situations in which failures of advice and support may lead to changes in long-term trajectories of marital outcome (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Looking at the study as a whole, these findings indicate that when designing culturally sensitive interventions, it is important to look not only between racial groups, but also for differences that may arise within racial groups. Particularly, it is important to consider the

interface between racial differences and gender differences to ensure that therapeutic interventions are specific to each member of a couple.

Limitations. The current study examined a sample of urban and rural African American couples and a sample of urban European American couples from the southeastern United States. It is possible that the differences found in the current study were the result of the unique enculturation of each racial group in the southern U.S., and would not generalize to other areas of the country. However, studies have replicated findings regarding the collectivistic perspective espoused by African American individuals using samples from a variety of locations (e.g., Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001), and so it is likely that at least some of the differences observed are due to racial and ethnic differences and not merely differences due to location.

An unexpected limitation of the findings in this study was the negative response to low-relevance advice in the African American sample. According to Self-Evaluation Maintenance theory, low-relevance advice should be easier to accept, as it should not incite a threat to self-definition (e.g., Pleban & Tesser, 1981). However, comparing the expertise ratings provided at the end of the second session offers a potential explanation for this surprising response. In comparison to the European American sample, African American individuals rated themselves as more expert in low relevance problem areas, $t(276) = -2.32, p = .02$. Coupled with the egalitarian views espoused in many African American relationships, it may be that low relevance advice has as much potential as high relevance advice to incite self evaluation threat in this population. However, these findings will have to be replicated with other samples to ensure that the differences within and between racial groups are robust.

Another limitation in this study was the fact that the European American couples showed no significant response to the relationship awareness manipulation. This limits the applicability

and generalizability of any cross-cultural findings in this study. As the primary focus of this research was on unique features of African American relationships, the response of the European American sample provides an interesting comparison. However, more research will need to be done on the specific mechanisms at work in both of these populations to truly explicate any cross-cultural differences.

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Table 1.

Mean Collectivism and Individualism Scores by Gender and Racial Group.

	European American		African American	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Collectivism	M = 6.64 (SD = .89)	M = 6.52 (SD = 1.08)	M = 7.02 (SD = 1.08)	M = 6.79 (SD = 1.12)
	Total: 6.5797 (.99)		Total: 6.90 (1.10)	
Individualism	M = 6.09 (SD = .75)	M = 5.71 (SD = .85)	M = 6.02 (SD = 1.12)	M = 5.87 (SD = 1.03)
	Total: 5.90 (.82)		Total: 5.94 (1.08)	

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Ratings of helpfulness from Session 1 as a function of racial group (European American, EA vs. African American, AA), gender (male vs. female), and relevance (high vs. low).

Figure 2. Ratings of helpfulness from Session 2 as a function of racial group (European American, EA vs. African American, AA), gender (male vs. female), condition (Team vs. Uniqueness) and relevance (high vs. low).

Figure 3. Ratings of helpfulness from Session 2 for African Americans as a function of gender (male vs. female) and condition (Team vs. Uniqueness).

Figure 4. Ratings of helpfulness from Session 2 for European Americans as a function of gender (male vs. female) and condition (Team vs. Uniqueness).

Figure 1.

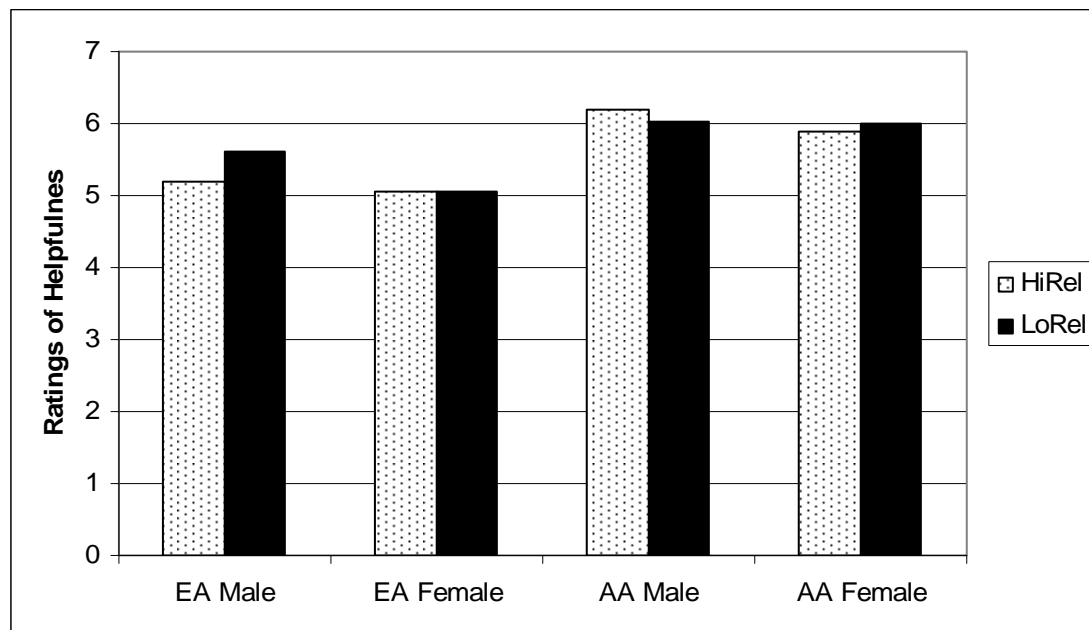


Figure 2.

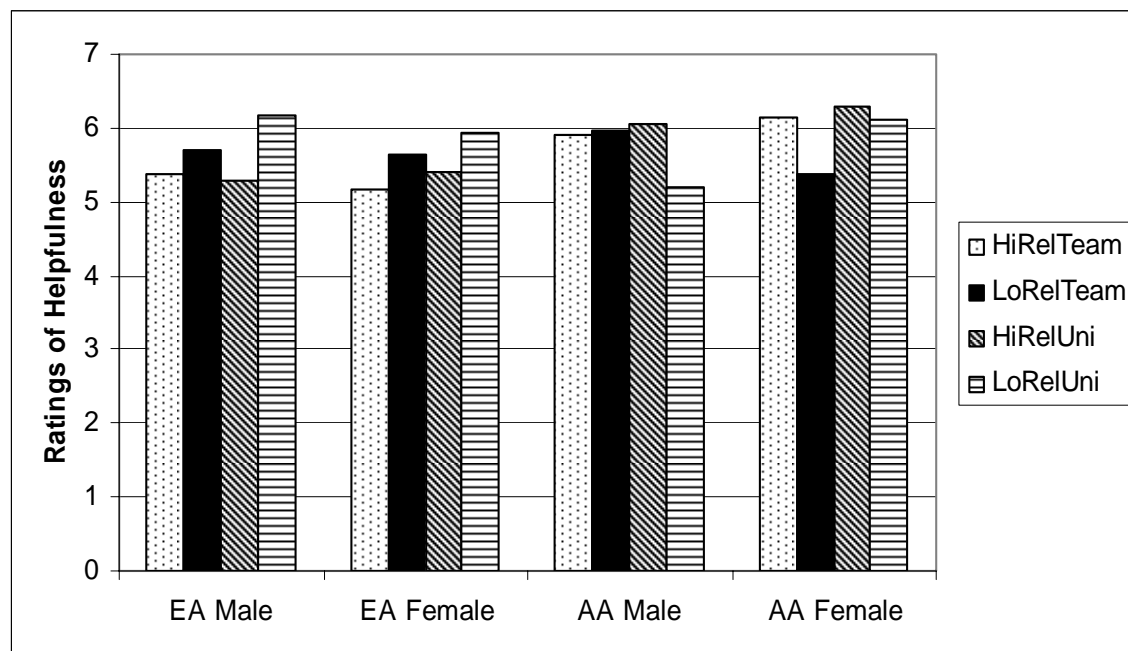


Figure 3.

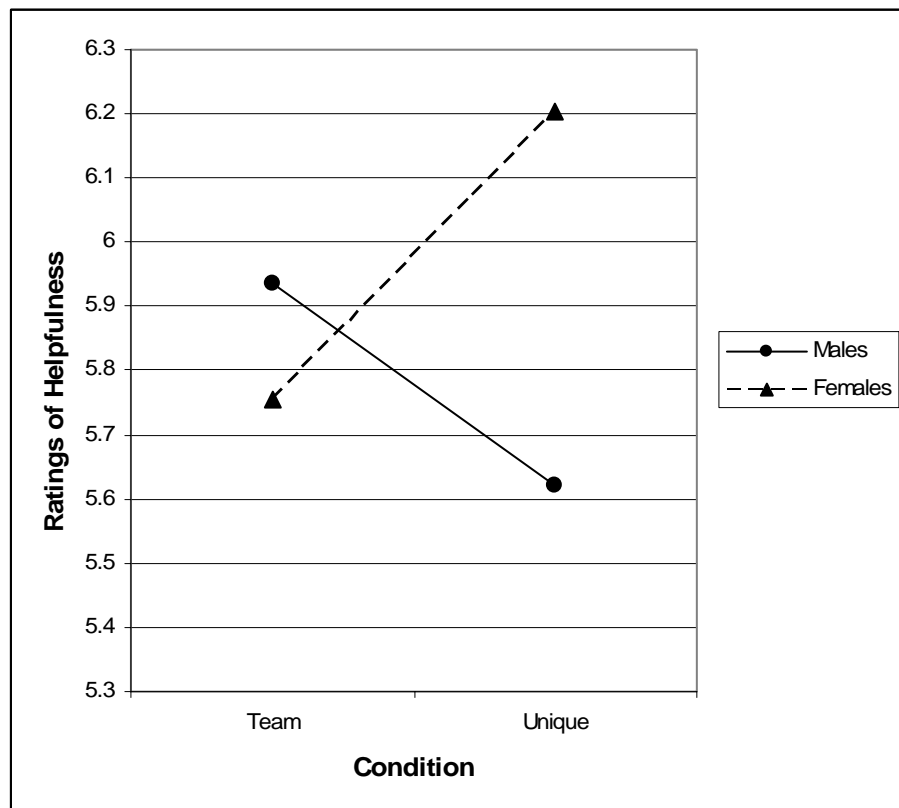


Figure 4.

