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Factors Affecting Relationship Quality in African-American/Caucasian  
Bi-Racial Couples

Joriann L. McGrath

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

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December 2012

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## ABSTRACT

### Factors Affecting Relationship Quality in African-American/Caucasian Bi-Racial Couples

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Master of Science

This study examined the direct actor/partner effects of self-esteem, coming to terms, and relationship quality and the indirect effects of self-esteem on relationship quality when mediated by coming to terms. The sample included 160 interracial couples of which 69.4% were made up of an African-American male and a Caucasian female, while 30.6 were made up of an African-American female and a Caucasian male. These couples completed the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE), a survey questionnaire. This study used three variables from the RELATE: self-esteem, coming to terms, and relationship quality. Results from Structural Equation Modeling indicated that self-esteem had a negative effect on relationship quality in men and women. Female partner's negative self-esteem increased her male partner's likelihood of coming to terms, but male partner's negative self-esteem decreased his own likelihood of coming to terms. Coming to terms did not predict relationship quality in this study. The relatively satisfied couples of this sample suggest that interracial couples may not have poorer relationship quality than intraracial couples, as some previous research purports.

Keywords: coming to terms, interracial couples, relationship quality, self-esteem

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## Introduction

In the not too distant past, a paper written about interracial couples would not have been well received. In remembering the history of the United States including slavery, the Civil Rights movement, and desegregation, one recognizes that relationships of any kind between African-Americans and Caucasians would have been labeled unacceptable. Consequently, romantic relationships between these two racially dichotomous groups have been ridiculed, and until recently, have been against the law. But, with Alabama being the last state to finally eradicate the miscegenation laws that banned marital unions between Blacks and Whites in 2000 (Harthill, 2001), such couples have become legally acceptable in the United States. Nevertheless, racism and prejudice still remain, and interracial couples continue to encounter opposition from others, and sometimes, even from their own internalized fears.

Although interracial couples formed from various combinations of ethnicities exist (interracial marriages account for 3% of all marriages, U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), this paper focuses specifically on relationships and marriages between African-Americans and Caucasians. One study found that the number of African-American and Caucasian couples has quadrupled since 1970 (Domokos-Cheng Ham, 1995). Currently, African-American and Caucasian couples make up 8% of all total marriages in the United States, yet they are underrepresented according to population when compared to interracial relationships involving other minorities (Lewis, 2010). In fact, Whites have been found to be the least likely of all races to marry Blacks, and Blacks are the least likely of all races to be part of an interracial relationship (Lee & Edmonston, 2005). Furthermore, out of these less common unions, the majority consist of African-American males and Caucasian females, with this dyad making up 73.8% of Black/White interracial marriages (Perry & Sutton, 2006).

Fortunately, as time passes, a slight shift in public approval for interracial marriages is taking place. Studies of new generations show that younger people are more accepting of interracial marriages than older adults (Golebiowska, 2007). Also, those with interracial friendships are more accepting of interracial marriages than individuals who do not have a friend belonging to a different race (Jacobson & Johnson, 2006). Furthermore, Lewis, Yancey, and Bletzer (1997) found that racial selection factors are less influential in spouse selection than common interests, physical attractiveness, and similar entertainment interests. Therefore, individuals forming interracial relationships may be more concerned with being compatible with their partner than with racial differences. As African-Americans and Caucasians become more integrated in society, the likelihood that members of these races will share more interests also increases, thus increasing the potential for more interracial relationships.

Although numbers indicate that interracial couples gradually have become more prevalent, these couples still endure specific obstacles that other couples do not have to face. For example, interracial couples may experience issues related to inadequate social support and family-of-origin support, added stressors related to life stage transitions due to varying cultural differences, and the challenges of parenting biracial children (Poulsen, 2003). The increased prevalence of interracial marriages does not mean that the prejudice and adversity these couples experience during their courtship and marriage has decreased. Interracial couples still experience negative reactions to their relationship by members of their own race, as well as members of other races (Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003). Killian (2001) found that this disapproval from others may be more difficult for some partners than others. For example, the African-American partner in the relationship has been shown to be more perceptive of public disapproval and more emotionally affected than their Caucasian partner (Killian, 2001). Not only do



interracial couples face racism from strangers, but the amount of acceptance coming from members of their support system can also vary (Killian, 2001). When interracial couples experience insufficient support from family and friends, it undoubtedly puts strain on the relationship (Poulsen, 2003). It may also lead some individuals to second-guess their own judgment and question their commitment to the relationship.

In spite of these obstacles, love still prevails, and interracial couples still form. In fact, Qian and Litcher (2011) report that the number of Black/White marriages has tripled since 1980. Unfortunately, the trials these couples often endure have a negative effect on various aspects of their relationship (Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003). In order to ultimately help improve the relationship quality of these couples, this paper aims to discover the effects of specific factors on relationship quality, namely *self-esteem* and *coming to terms* on interracial couples. *Self-esteem* is defined as “an individual’s perceptions and evaluations of himself or herself” (Civitci & Civitci, 2009, p. 955). Martinson, Holman, Larson, and Jackson (2010), define *coming to terms* as “an outcome of a healing process that involves individuals’ efforts to interpret, understand, find meaning in, re-story, reframe, come to a resolution, and to be at peace with difficult past experiences” (p. 208).

## **Literature Review**

### **African-American/Caucasian Couples**

African-American and Caucasian is the least common union within the couples labeled as interracial (Lee & Edmonston, 2005). Traditionally, some have seen these two races as literal opposites. Even for the more accepting individuals who choose to be in an interracial relationship, it takes a tremendous amount of work to make these unions successful. One article indicated that in order to create a unified identity, couples must resolve issues with their family

that their union creates, overcome the racial history of Blacks and Whites, and integrate both African-American and Caucasian viewpoints into one interracial viewpoint (Byrd & Garwick, 2006). Others suggest that creating an interracial viewpoint may cause partners to question their own sense of racial identity, especially in African-Americans who were found to be more ambivalent (i.e. neither satisfied, nor dissatisfied) towards their interracial relationships, regardless of gender (Forry, Leslie, & Letiecq, 2007). Further research shows similar findings that partners who are more strongly identified with their own racial identity report greater marital satisfaction overtime (Leslie & Letiecq, 2004).

African-American/Caucasian couples suffer stress that intraracial couples do not because they must be on guard when in public or intentionally choose surroundings that they know will be more accepting of their relationship (Steil, Rothman, Harris, Kim, & Steil, 2009). Thus, leisure activities that typically would add to greater relationship quality in couples may not serve this purpose for African-American/Caucasian couples. Instead, in one study, leisure activities were associated with negative sentiments because this is when couples were most likely to experience public discrimination (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002). As these interracial unions increase frequency, it becomes more important to determine what additional factors may influence the relationship quality of these couples. This study aims to help augment the literature on interracial couples by focusing on the impact of specific individual factors on relationship quality, namely *self-esteem* and *coming to terms*.

### **Relationship Quality**

Relationship quality can be affected by internal and external factors related to the couple, such as demographic factors, personality, attachment styles, and emotional loneliness (Knoke, Burau, & Roehrle, 2010). Furthermore, egalitarian gender roles and perceived fairness of

division of responsibilities has been linked to greater marital quality in couples (Forry, Leslie, & Letiecq, 2007). Johnson and Booth (1998) also found that social background (i.e. demographic factors) affect relationship quality. Nevertheless, they also asserted that the combination of two different backgrounds in the couple relationship have a greater effect on relationship quality than the individual personality traits. The influence of social background on relationship quality becomes especially interesting when considered in terms of interracial relationships.

### **Interracial Relationships and Relationship Quality**

Prior research findings on interracial relationship quality have produced mixed results. In one study, when compared to intraracial couples, interracial couples were found to have greater relationship quality and no differences in conflict patterns (Troy, et al., 2006). On the other hand, Hohmann-Marriot and Amato (2008) found that interracial couples report lower relationship quality than intraracial couples. They also found that interracial couples reported less satisfaction, more conflict, and greater expectations that the relationship will end. Furthermore, interracial relationships were found to be more likely to divorce than intraracial couples, especially interracial couples composed of a Caucasian partner and an African-American partner (Bratter & King, 2008). This highlights the possibility that African-American/Caucasian couples may be under more strain than other interracial couples.

Research suggests that when interracial relationships are strained, the individual partners may not know how to regulate stress and negative feelings toward each other. For example, interracial couples were found to have higher arrest rates and mutual assault rates 1.5 times greater than minority couples (Fusco, 2010). Perhaps these minorities, because they do not feel safe enough to stand up against the public or family members who treat them unjustly, instead take these aggressive feelings out on each other. Because the literature on the relationship

quality of interracial couples is conflicted and still limited, more research specifically analyzing interracial relationships is needed to better understand how certain factors of relationship quality affect these couples.

Nevertheless, various reasons may contribute to poorer relationship quality in an African-American/ Caucasian couple. As previously mentioned, African-Americans and Caucasians may come from different socioeconomic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. Many see African-Americans and Caucasians as being opposites on the ethnicity spectrum, meaning that their ethnic differences are more polarized than differences found when comparing any other ethnicities to each other. Hohmann-Marriot and Amato (2008) assert that the further apart each partner's background is on this spectrum, the more difficulties the couple may encounter. These couples enter into a relationship with someone who may not share the same values as they do. Of course, some differing values may be present in all relationships, but the chances increase with the influence of cultural factors. It also may require more work to reconcile cultural differences and compromise if the partners' families do not support the relationship.

Moreover, African-American/Caucasian couples may experience poorer relationship quality regardless of the level of commitment in the relationship. In Hohmann-Marriot and Amato's study (2008), poor relationship quality was found in both married and cohabitating interracial couples. Also, the stress surrounding being in an interracial relationship may in turn affect one's mental health, which may contribute to decreased relationship quality. For example, Caucasian women in interracial marriages were found to have higher psychological distress than Caucasian women married to Caucasian men. The psychological distress was greater in Caucasian women married to African-American men, as opposed to women married to men belonging to any other minority ethnic group (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006). Further research is

needed to discover which specific aspects of an interracial relationship contribute the most to the development of psychological stress. By examining the affect of self-esteem and family-of-origin resolution on relationship quality, this study endeavors to determine if these factors increase psychological distress, and thus, contribute to poorer marital quality.

### **Self-Esteem and Relationship Quality**

Self-esteem has proven to be one of the internal individual factors that affect a couple's relationship quality (Larson, Anderson, Holman, & Niemann, 1998; Shackelford, 2001). The research varies, however as to whether self-esteem is consistently related to relationship satisfaction in the same way. In one study, Shackelford (2001) found that high self-esteem was positively correlated with emotional satisfaction in the marriage for both husbands and wives. It is also unknown as to whether or not partners' poor self-esteem leads to poorer relationship quality, or if poor relationship quality leads to the development of poorer self-esteem in the partners. High self-esteem in men has been shown to protect husbands from developing symptoms of depression when marital problems occur (Culp, 1998). On the other hand, wives' self-esteem has been shown to decrease when marital problems occur, which may lead to the development of symptoms of depression in these women (Culp, 1998). Another study showed that if a wife's self-esteem before marriage was high, this predicted greater marital sexual satisfaction in both the husband and the wife (Larson, Anderson, Holman, & Niemann, 1998). Thus, a strong connection between self-esteem and relationship quality has been found. Such studies highlight the value of maintaining high self-esteem in those individuals who already possess it, as well as increasing self-esteem as an intervention to promote more positive interactions in relationships.

To the author's awareness, no research has been conducted to discover how self-esteem impacts the relationship quality of interracial couples. Those who purport that minorities have lower self-esteem would also assume that individuals involved in interracial relationships would have lower self-esteem. In contrast, one study reports that the self-esteem of individuals in interracial relationships does not seem to differ from individuals belonging to intraracial relationships (Gurung, 1999). This study hopes to provide clear data on the impact that self-esteem has on the relationship quality of interracial couples.

Certain studies have examined the relationship between ethnic background and self-esteem (Pierre & Mahalik, 2005; Shaw, Liang, & Krause, 2010; Tovar-Murray & Munley, 2007). If self-esteem and relationship quality have been found to affect each other, then the relationship satisfaction of persons in an interracial marriage may also be affected by the individual's self-esteem. Because current literature has not examined the effect of self-esteem on interracial marriages, this study will test this hypothesis. Research has shown that African-Americans' self-esteem is similar to that of Caucasians, but declines during old age, partly due to a change in socioeconomic status (Orth, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010). In fact, higher social class and more education are related to high self-esteem in African-Americans (Tovar-Murray & Munley, 2007). Such findings suggest that self-esteem in members of minority ethnic groups is fluid, and that it should not be taken for granted that people belonging to minority ethnic groups will have low self-esteem.

On the contrary, several studies show that identification with one's ethnicity actually is correlated with higher self-esteem. For example, African-Americans who positively identify with their ethnicity and are connected with their ethnic group, experience greater feelings of self-worth (Tovar-Murray & Munley, 2007). This assertion was supported in another study reporting

that African-American men who feel secure in their ethnicity and do not have prejudiced beliefs about Caucasians have higher self-esteem than African-American men who do not feel secure in their ethnic identity (Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006). African-Americans' self-esteem may actually be relatively stable due to their individualistic culture, but this self-esteem decreases with age, even to a greater extent than Caucasians' self-esteem decreases (Shaw, Liang, & Krause, 2010).

### **Coming to Terms**

Family-of-origin experiences have been linked to current relationship quality (Martinson, Holman, Larson, & Jackson, 2010). Drawing a comparison of satisfied and unsatisfied couples, satisfied couples had stronger relationships with their families-of-origin and also with their spouse's family (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010). Research has also studied the connection between coming to terms with difficulties in one's family-of-origin and relationship quality (Dagley, 2011; Strait, Sandberg, Larson, & Harper, in press). Individuals who have resolved difficult family-of-origin experiences have greater marital satisfaction than those who do not (Martinson, Holman, Larson, & Jackson, 2010).

Several issues stemming from one's family-of-origin have been found to have an impact on the offspring's later relationship quality. For example, parents' marital quality affects their children's (particularly their daughter's) attitudes about relationships (Busby, Gardner, and Taniguchi, 2005). For a male, his relationship with his mother has a greater effect on him than the quality of his parents' marriage. Amato and Booth (2001) also found that parents' marital discord was associated with poor marital harmony and marital discord in their children's relationships. Effective parenting of adolescents is also associated with interpersonal competence and positive relationship quality in the romantic relationships of young adults

(Conger, Cui, Bryant, and Elder, 2000). Psychological maltreatment during childhood, which leads to mental distress, is also associated with later marital dissatisfaction (Perry, DiLillo, Peugh, 2007).

Furthermore, how a partner perceives his or her family-of-origin experiences influences the degree of marital adjustment and relationship satisfaction. For example, men who experienced hostility in their family-of-origin were found to have poorer marital adjustment (Whitton, Waldinger, Schulz, Allen, Crowell, & Hauser, 2008). However, men's independence from their family-of-origin, as well as associated guilt, anger, and resentment, was related to higher marital satisfaction in both husbands and wives (Haws & Mallinckrodt, 1998). Another study reported that wives' experiences were shown to have a greater effect on both the husband and the wife's marital adjustment (Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). Moreover, family-of-origin experiences also influence a partner's perception of hostile marital conflict, with the wife being more influenced (Topham, Larson, & Holman, 2005). Furthermore, in a study examining the effects of various family-of-origin factors on the quality of romantic relationships, Holman and Busby (2011) found that differentiation from difficult family-of-origin issues was the strongest predictor of relationship quality in both males and females. They also found that the one spouse's differentiation affected their partner's relationship quality. The research on the influence of family-of-origin resolution on the relationship quality of interracial couples is also lacking, which further purports the necessity of the current study.

### **Self-Esteem and Coming to Terms**

Busby et al. (2005) found that the direct relationship between family-of-origin variables and self-esteem was not strong, but that family-of-origin does affect self-esteem, based on the adult child's perception of the influence of their family-of-origin. Negative family-of-origin



experiences lead to lower levels of self-esteem. Another study also found that childhood adversities such as parental absence, mother antisocial behavior, neglect, and three or more adversities were significantly associated with self-criticism and a negative self-image in adolescents and adults (Pagura, Cox, Sareen, & Enns, 2006). Furthermore, sexual victimization, including sexual victimization by a caregiver, was associated with a decrease in self-esteem in adolescents, who may assume the victimization is a result of the individual's own failures or shortcomings (Turner, Finkelhor, and Omrod, 2010).

Not only do negative family-of-origin experiences affect self-esteem, but one's self-esteem also affects the extent to which negative family-of-origin experiences have a lasting impact on the individual. Individuals who have been exposed to childhood adversity may respond internally or externally in negative ways, but high self-esteem was found to be a factor promoting resiliency in these individuals, in spite of exposure to adversity (Ferguson & Horwood, 2003). Self-esteem was also found to reduce the likelihood of depression and anger in adolescents who have been sexually abused (Asgeirsdottir, Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Sigfusdottir, 2010).

### **Control Variables**

Other variables affecting relationship quality that will be controlled in this study include, the age of the partners and the length of the relationship. Age has been found to be positively associated with marital quality (Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman, 1994). Older couples have higher marital satisfaction than middle-aged couples, and older partners have more positive perceptions of their spouse's behavior overall (Henry, Berg, Smith, and Florsheim, 2007). Other studies have found that marital quality declines over time (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, and Campbell, 2005; VanLangingham, Johnson, and Amato, 2001). Umberson et al. (2001) also

found that negative marital experiences increase and positive marital experiences decrease over time. Both age and length of marriage are associated with relationship quality, but the association between age and relationship quality is stronger and more consistent (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, and Campbell, 2005). Because age and the length of the relationship have an effect on relationship quality, these variables will be controlled in order to gain a more accurate understanding of the influence of self-esteem and family-of-origin on relationship quality.

### **Summary**

Both self-esteem and resolving family-of-origin issues have an effect on couple's relationship quality. The current study will make a contribution to the literature on interracial marriages because no articles could be found determining how self-esteem and family-of-origin resolution specifically affect interracial couples in general, let alone African-American/Caucasian couples in particular. Self-esteem becomes important to this study because interracial couples experience unique stressors that intraracial couples do not face (i.e. discrimination); these stressors may have an effect on the partners' self-esteem (i.e. self-hatred). Previous research controls do not take into account the relevance of self-esteem to interracial couples and how it may affect their relationship quality.

Based on prior research on the effect of self-esteem and family-of-origin resolution on relationship quality, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: Self-esteem and coming to terms will affect the relationship quality of African-American/Caucasian couples.

H2: If the husband or wife has higher self-esteem, he or she will also experience greater relationship quality.

H3: The husband's self-esteem will affect the wife's relationship quality and the wife's self-esteem will affect the husband's relationship quality.

H4: Coming to terms will mediate the negative impact of low self-esteem on relationship quality.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This study analyzes data from the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE) responses of 160 African-American/Caucasian couples. 69.4% of the couples were made up of an African-American male and a Caucasian female, while 30.6% of the couples were made up of an African-American female and a Caucasian male. The mean age of the males is 31 years old, and the mean age of the females is 29 years old. Of the men, 26.9% were currently enrolled in college, 20.6% had a bachelor's degree, 16.9% had a graduate degree, and 14.4% had some college education, but were not currently enrolled. Of the women, 33.1% were currently enrolled in college, 26.3% had a graduate degree, 19.4 % had a bachelor's degree, and 4.4% had some college education, but were not currently enrolled. The most common religious affiliation for both males and females was Protestant (42.5% of the males and 39.4% of the females).

### **Procedure**

Data from the RELATE was analyzed in order to select the 160 interracial couples. The RELATE questionnaire, which contains over 300 items, was developed in 1997 (Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997), and data has been gathered since then. Couples complete the questionnaire online and pay \$20.00 to view the results, which is an evaluation of the couple according to their responses. Couples are evaluated on four main contexts: individual,

couple, family, and social. Participants answer questions about these four contexts about themselves and also about how they perceive their partners.

The RELATE questionnaire has gone through rigorous validity and reliability testing, proving to have good test-retest and internal consistent reliability and content, construct, and concurrent validity (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). For internal consistency and 2 test-retest samples, reliability coefficients for most measures scored between .70 and .90. Further examination of construct validity showed that 92% of the items loaded in the correct subscale and while testing for overlap, appropriate correlations for similar items emerged (range between .45 and .65). Measures of RELATE were also compared with scales from the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) (Busby, Crane, Larson, & Christensen, 1995) to measure concurrent validity and revealed strong correlations in the appropriate direction with every subscale that was tested.

## Measures

This study will focus on the RELATE items that measure self-esteem, coming to terms, and relationship quality. The RELATE Self-Esteem Scale consists of four statements that participants answer on a five-point Likert scale that ranges from “Never” to “Very Often” according to how well they believe the statement describes themselves and their partners. The reliability of this scale is good (Cronbach Alpha male= .779; female=.796). A sample item on the self-esteem scale is, “I take a positive attitude toward myself.”

The RELATE measures *Coming to Terms* according to the Family Influence Scale. Participants are asked how much they agree with the three statements on the scale based on their childhood. Items are answered on a five-point Likert scale that ranges from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The reliability of this scale is good (Cronbach Alpha male = .736; female=

.779). A sample item on the scale is, “There are matters from my family experience that I’m still having trouble dealing with or coming to terms with.”

The latent variable of *Relationship Quality* consisted of three observed variables: *Relationship Satisfaction* (male alpha = .867; female alpha = .853), *Relationship Stability* (male alpha = .831; female alpha = .827), and *Problem Areas* (male alpha = .806; female alpha = .790). *Relationship Satisfaction* was measured with seven items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Very Dissatisfied” to “Very Satisfied”. *Relationship Stability* contained three items measured with a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Never” to “Very Often”. An example item read, “How often have you and your partner discussed ending your relationship (or marriage)?” *Problem Areas* contained eleven items (ten when Intimacy/Sexuality is removed for analysis purposes) including areas like “Communication” and “Time spent together.” It was measured with the same scale and range as *Relationship Stability*.

### **Analysis and Results**

The multivariate correlation procedure, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), was used because of its ability to test both direct and indirect relationships among several different variables that may be correlated using the AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) program (Kline, 2005). The effects of self-esteem and coming to terms on male’s and female’s relationship quality were examined. Also, coming to terms was tested for any moderating effects on male’s and female’s relationship quality. Standardized and unstandardized coefficients and Goodness of Fit indices were also taken into consideration to help identify relationships among variables and the appropriateness of the model. Preliminary analysis was done to determine if a mediating or moderating variable was the best fit for the model, and a mediating variable was found to be the better fit. A bivariate correlation was done to further test for significance. Male

coming to terms was significantly correlated with male relationship quality at the .03 level, but in the presence of self-esteem, this is no longer significant.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Mean and standard deviation scores were reported for all variables using basic statistical methods (see table 1).

### **Full Model**

Goodness of fit indices suggest the model was an adequate fit for the data, with two of the three indicators approaching range. The CFI for the model was .967, the TLI was .894, and the RMSEA was .084, with a chi-square of 35.849 ( $df = 17, p = .005$ ). CFI and TLI values of above .95 (Byrne, 2001) and an RMSEA value of below .05 (Arbuckle, 2006) indicate good model fit. Seven percent of the variance in relationship satisfaction for females is accounted for by the full model, with 10% of the variance accounted for in relationship satisfaction for men.

### **Direct Actor Paths**

The model tested twelve different direct effects falling under three different categories for each gender: Self-esteem, Coming to Terms and Relationship Quality. Self-esteem was significantly associated with Coming to Terms in the negative direction for males ( $\beta = -.45, p = .001$ ), but not for females ( $\beta = -.18, p = .125$ ). These findings suggest that men who have low self-esteem are less likely to come to terms, although this is not true for women in our study. Self-esteem was significantly associated with Relationship Quality in the negative direction for males ( $\beta = -.22, p = .094$ ) and females in our study ( $\beta = -.20, p = .098$ ), but only at trend level, meaning as negative self esteem increases relationship quality decreases for both genders. Coming to Terms was not significantly associated with Relationship Quality for males ( $\beta = .07, p = .435$ ) or females ( $\beta = .10, p = .286$ ) in our study.

### **Direct Partner Paths**

Female's Self-esteem was significantly associated (at trend level) with male's Coming to Terms ( $\beta = .21, p = .053$ ), but male's self-esteem was not significantly associated with female's Coming to Terms ( $\beta = -.07, p = .554$ ) (see Figure 1). Female's Self-esteem was not significantly associated with female's Relationship Quality ( $\beta = .10, p = .374$ ), and male's Self-esteem was not significantly associated with female's Relationship Quality ( $\beta = -.14, p = .210$ ). Female's Coming to Terms was not significantly associated with male's Relationship Quality ( $\beta = .10, p = .223$ ), and male's Coming to Terms was not significantly associated with female's Relationship Quality ( $\beta = .00, p = .996$ ).

### **Indirect Paths, Mediation, and Variance Explained**

Because there were no significant direct effects from Coming to Terms to Relationship Quality, for males or females, there were no significant indirect paths and no mediation in this model, which runs contrary to our hypotheses (see Figure 1). The R-square for the female Relationship Quality was .07; the R-square for male Relationship Quality was .10, meaning less than 10% of the variance in Relationship Quality was explained for by the model for both men and women. In addition, a model was explored which tested the potential for Coming to Terms as moderating variable; the results for this model do not support Coming to Terms as a moderator.

### **Discussion**

In the study, self-esteem had a negative effect on relationship quality for both men and women. The less self-esteem, the more relationship problems were reported. Previous literature has shown the positive effects of high self-esteem on relationship quality (Shackelford 2001; Larson, Anderson, Holman, & Niemann, 1998), but not the effects of low self-esteem on

relationship quality. Perhaps when individuals have low self-esteem their thoughts are more self-focused, and they give less attention to their partner and/or their relationship. Also, a person with low self-esteem may not be as confident that he or she can have a satisfying relationship; therefore, their efforts in their relationship may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, an individual with low self-esteem may not consider themselves worthy of a healthy, compatible partner, and may settle with a partner ill-suited for him or her. These possible explanations are particularly salient for couples already facing unique obstacles, such as those in interracial relationships. For example, interracial couples face greater risk of not being accepted by both the public and their families (Killian, 2001; Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003). Because research has also found that belongingness contributes to self-esteem, perhaps, individuals who have been rejected due to their participation in an interracial relationship may, as a result, have lower self-esteem, and in turn, lower relationship quality (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007).

The study also found that the more severe the wife's negative self-esteem, the more likely the husband is to come to terms with family-of-origin experiences. On the other hand, the higher the husband's negative self-esteem, the less likely he is to come to terms. Previous literature was not found specifically linking self-esteem with coming to terms, but it did purport that negative family-of-origin experiences lead to lower self-esteem in individuals (Busby et al., 2005). Perhaps men with low-esteem lack the strength and self-valuing needed to separate themselves from negative family-of-origin experiences. However, there may be a relational component that is different for the men. Perhaps when the female partner has low self-esteem, the male partner's focus shifts to helping her. This shift may distract him from negative feelings associated with his family-of-origin and these issues may become less of a priority for him.

Contrary to our hypothesis, coming to terms was not a predictor of relationship quality in



this study. Other research has found coming to terms to be associated with greater relationship quality (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010; Martinson, Holman, Larson, & Jackson, 2010). The simple correlations of this study also found that coming to terms was correlated with relationship quality, but once self-esteem was included in the model, the significant results of the correlations washed out. Because coming to terms did not affect relationship quality in this sample, there may be something unique about interracial couples in this respect. Coming to terms is a process that requires individuals to address family-of-origin issues that are often distant (both in time and location) from the current relationship.

There are a number of potential reasons as to why coming to terms was non-significant and self-esteem was more significant for biracial couples. Given the obstacles that many of these couples face, perhaps a strong and centered self is crucial for the survival of these relationships. Even though variation was found among participants' responses to the coming to terms questions, this study did not measure for specific family-of-origin problems or the severity or frequency of these problems. More research is needed to determine whether or not family-of-origin variables are a major player for this group. Furthermore, our sample predominately consisted of African-American male and Caucasian female couples. This study found two significant paths from self-esteem to coming to terms for men, but no significant paths were found for the women; perhaps further research would show a racial explanation for this finding. It is also possible that coming to terms did not influence relationship satisfaction because the interracial couples in this sample were relatively happy in terms of relationship satisfaction (see Table 1). In the end, it seems that a positive self-view had a more powerful effect on the relationship quality of this study's sample than past family-of-origin issues.

## Implications for Clinicians

The findings of this study suggest that a partner's self-esteem may be particularly salient for interracial couples in their attempts to build a good relationship. Therefore, clinicians working with these couples who are presenting relationship problems should assess for feelings of low self-worth in each partner. In cognitive couple therapy, clients address beliefs and automatic thoughts that one partner may have about their spouse's behavior that may not actually be true (Baucom, Epstein, LaTaillade, & Kirby, 2008). Because an individual's schema is influenced by culture and family-of-origin experiences, partners of interracial couples may need to acquire skills that will allow them to process information differently. For example, egalitarian gender roles are associated with greater marital quality, yet Caucasian spouses have been found to perform less hours of housework than minority spouses (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Forry, Leslie, & Letiecq, 2007). Spouses in an interracial relationship may enter the relationship with differing beliefs about gender roles and division of labor; but, if these spouses were able to alter their schemas by way of rewriting or adjusting expectations, the potential for issues related to gender roles with these couples could be diminished. In addition to couple therapy, individual sessions may be needed for each partner to help them increase self-esteem. Cognitive behavioral therapy may prove useful to increase each partner's awareness of distorted thoughts and beliefs that contribute to their low self-esteem (Burns, 1999). Individual therapy could give each partner the opportunity to further revise belief systems that may be detrimental to the relationship.

Previous research shows interracial couples may face specific challenges that do not apply to intraracial couples, such as inadequate social and/or family-of-origin support and public disapproval (Killian, 2001; Poulsen, 2003; Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003). Because these issues

can lead to relationship dissatisfaction and emotional stress, interracial couples facing such challenges may need special assistance. For example, a therapist working with an interracial couple may need to explore and process “pride-shame issues” associated with each partner’s “cultural of origin,” as well as “invisible wounds of oppression” and self-hatred/internalized oppression that may affect couple dynamics (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002, p. 577). After segregated thinking and wounds of oppression have been identified, Hardy and Laszloffy suggest that such wounds can be healed by challenging structures of domination and making amends for previous acts of injustice that have occurred in the relationship. The therapist can also promote intimacy in the couple relationship by facilitating each partner’s acceptance of their spouse’s differences and helping each partner see their spouse’s humanness and vulnerabilities (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002).

Results from the study showed that couples belonging to this sample were mostly satisfied with their relationships, and that male and female partners rated their level of relationship satisfaction similarly. Therefore, one of the most significant implications of this study’s findings is that clinicians need not assume that interracial couples are predestined to fail or that low relationship quality is the norm for these couples. Instead, it may be beneficial for clinicians to take a strength-based approach when working with interracial couples in therapy.

For example, solution-focused couple therapy may prove particularly useful for interracial couples due to its theoretical belief that clients are competent and able to facilitate their own shifts in perspective and new interactions (Hoyt, 2008). Clients may be able to view their cultural differences as complementary strengths, not the root of their marital problems.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Results showed that a female partner's low self-esteem affected her male partner's ability to come to terms with issues from his family-of-origin, but a male's self-esteem did not affect his partner's ability to come to terms. Further research is needed to determine the impact of self-esteem on one's ability to come to terms with family-of-origin problems in general and also to examine possible explanations regarding gender differences found in this study. For instance, could it be that a when a male is focused on his partner's esteem that he is less concerned about the problems in his family-of-origin?

Research is also needed to further examine the relationship between family-of-origin issues in interracial relationships. Because coming to terms did not significantly affect the relationship quality of the couples in this sample, further research is needed to identify which family-of-origin experiences are most related to relationship satisfaction for interracial couples. Moreover, are there family-of-origin issues that have a greater impact on an interracial relationship in comparison to other racial or ethnic groups? Consequently, are any of the issues in the family-of-origin that directly impact the quality of the interracial relationship itself?

Because this study examined a community sample of individuals, it would be beneficial to use a clinical sample in future research. Do interracial couples in therapy present more family-of-origin issues than couples not in therapy? Does self-esteem have a greater impact on one's ability to come to terms in a clinical sample where individuals may be more likely to have negative family-of-origin experiences? The results found in this study may differ with interracial couples reporting lower relationship satisfaction.

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is the fact that the interracial couples in this study were not distressed. The fact that much of the prior research on interracial couples

examines the obstacles these couples face may be in response to the assumption that interracial relationships are more difficult than intraracial relationships (Marriot & Amato, 2008; Troy, et al., 2006). Furthermore, such research may actually perpetuate in clinicians the idea that interracial couples have added stressors in comparison to other couples. Consequently, further research is needed to highlight the unique strengths and resiliency of these couples. Greater knowledge of such strengths may provide clinicians with more resources to utilize when working with interracial couples that do present in therapy.

### **Limitations**

This study contains various limitations that may be addressed in future research. First, with only 160 couples, this study represents a relatively small sample size. Because only 49 couples were comprised of a Caucasian male partner and an African-American female partner, the results of this study may not generalize to this specific, albeit less common, interracial relationship demographic. Furthermore, the sample was comprised of a well educated, internet-using group, so results may not generalize to less educated individuals belonging to a lower socioeconomic group. This study yielded positive results partly due to the fact that the sample consisted of mostly satisfied couples. The relative satisfaction of these couples proved to be a limitation in that these couples may not represent the distressing relational issues a clinician would find in an interracial couple presenting in therapy.

### **Conclusion**

This purpose of this study was to add to previous research on the challenges interracial couples face and potential concurrent relationship dissatisfaction by examining specific factors that may affect their relationship quality. Results of the study suggest that while self-esteem affected relationship quality in the interracial relationship sample as predicted, coming to terms

did not have a significant effect on their relationship quality. Results of this study also showed that the couples in this sample were relatively satisfied, which adds another piece of evidence to the ongoing debate in the literature as to whether or not interracial couples are more prone to relationship problems than intraracial couples. This study's findings highlight the strength of interracial couples, and emphasize the important implication that clinicians cannot assume that racial differences in a committed relationship will lead to pathology. Instead, when working with these couples, clinicians need to empower partners by exploring individual strengths and as well as the strengths of the relationship (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002). Further research is needed to determine additional factors predicting relationship quality may be more salient for interracial couples, and also to determine if results of this study can be generalized to a clinical population.

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**Table 1**

	<b>Males</b>			<b>Females</b>		
	<b>Min - Max</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min - Max</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Self-Esteem</b>	4 – 13	6.62	1.93	4 – 14	6.75	2.35
<b>Coming to Terms</b>	3 – 15	10.59	3.05	3 – 15	9.94	2.98
<b>Rel Satisfaction</b>	7 – 35	26.85	5.45	9 – 35	26.29	5.58
<b>Rel Stability</b>	3 – 15	11.85	2.48	3 – 15	11.66	2.64
<b>Problem Areas</b>	14 – 50	39.83	6.73	21 – 50	40.21	6.48

**Table 2**

*Females- Bivariate Correlations for variables in SEM model.*

	1	2	3
1. Coming to Terms	–		
2. Self-Esteem	.224**	–	
3. Relationship Satisfaction	.140**	.214**	–

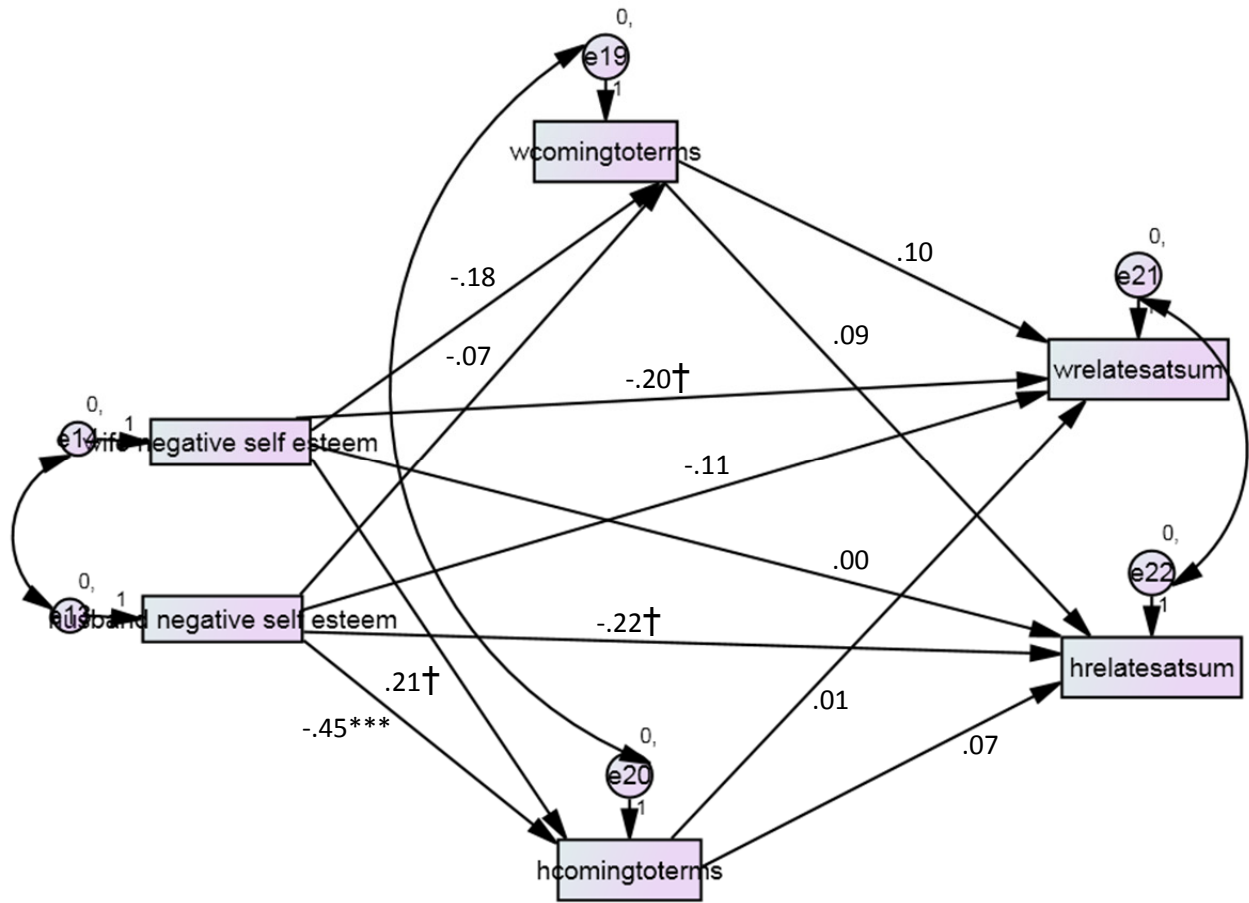
Notes:  $p \leq .05$ , \*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*

*Males- Bivariate Correlations for variables in SEM model.*

	1	2	3
1. Coming to Terms	–		
2. Self-Esteem	.347**	–	
3. Relationship Satisfaction	.174**	.270**	–

Notes:  $p \leq .05$ , \*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*

Figure 1. Results with standardized coefficients



\*\*\*=  $p < .001$

†=  $p < .10$  (trend)