

Relationship satisfaction in Black couples: The role of self-compassion and openness

by

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B.S., Jackson State University, 2009
M.S., University of Southern Mississippi, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Human Ecology
School of Family Studies and Human Services

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

The study explored how Black couples cope with perceived discrimination. More specifically, the study examined how perceived racial discrimination interacted with the enduring strength of self-compassion, and put a strain on couples' relationship processes that have implications for relationship satisfaction. Further, the role of open communication as a potential moderator of the consequences of maladaptive communication patterns on relationship satisfaction was examined. Participants were 210 Black married couples residing in the United States. A common-fate moderated mediation model was used to analyze the data. The results indicated that first, for both spouses, the higher the self-compassion, the lower was couple negative interactions. Second, for wives, self-compassion's relationship with negative interaction changed when discrimination perceived was high. Third, couple negative interaction was found to suppress the positive effects of self-compassion on relationship satisfaction. Fourth, for wives, openness changed the relationship between negative interaction and relationship satisfaction. Fifth, conditional indirect effects were found only for wives -- the extent self-compassion was related to relationship satisfaction through negative interaction was dependent on both the amount of discrimination perceived by wives and the degree of open communication wives reported in their relationships. The findings have implications for clinical work as well as further research.

Keywords: Black couples, relationship satisfaction, discrimination, self-compassion, openness

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of my friends and family who supported me along the way.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The need to better understand factors that may contribute to enduring Black marriages is critical given the rising divorce rates among Black Americans when divorce rates in the United States have been declining since 2014 (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). About 56% of first marriages of Black women will last ten years, compared with 68% for White women (Parker, Horowitz, & Mahl, 2016). While there is a robust body of research that focuses on relationship maintenance, minimal research account for racial differences (e.g., Billedo, Kerkhof & Finkenauer, 2015; Karremans, Pronk & van der Wal, 2015). Research on what contributes to the stability of Black marriages is scarce. Strategies applicable to White couples may not be transferable to Black couples because relationships are culturally constructed (Gabb, & Singh, 2015). While Black marriages may have similar relationship factors that lead to marital stability and divorce as in other races, how they manifest in the relationships may differ due to different environmental stresses.

The literature suggests that Black Americans continue to face environmental stresses such as discrimination, economic disadvantage, and health concerns (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001). The legacies of institutional racism be it education (e.g., Hudson, Neighbors, Geronimus, & Jackson, 2016), housing rentals and sales (e.g., Early, Carrillo, & Olsen, 2018), and hiring practices (e.g., Quillian, Pager, Hexel, & Midtbøen, 2017) continue to shape the lives of Black Americans. Exposure to racial discrimination is among the factors related to adverse mental and physical health outcomes in Black Americans (Graham, Calloway, & Roemer, 2015). Compared to White counterparts, discrimination perceived by ethnic minority college students, were found to account for poorer mental health status (Cokley, Hall-Clark, & Hicks, 2011). Interestingly, although higher economic and educational status do not serve as

protective factors from discrimination, Data from the National Survey of American Life Reinterview found that higher levels of education were positively associated with racial discrimination and increased levels of racial discrimination were positively related to depression (Hudson et al., 2016).

The demands of life and stress from racial discrimination can put a strain on not only personal but relational health. A recent study noted that partners in interracial Black-White marriages not only perceived discrimination for being in an interracial marriage but perceiving discrimination was related negatively to their relationship satisfaction (Baptist, Craig, & Nicholson, 2018). Understanding how Black and other minority race couples can protect their relationships from the negative impact of discrimination is necessary in order to enhance and maintain these relationships. In addition to understanding the specific ways Blacks cope with racialized stress related to their minority status (Brown, Phillips, Abdullah, Vinson, & Robertson, 2011), the role of enduring strengths and traits in buffering the effects of perceived discrimination on relationships can further help enhance these relationships.

Utilizing the Vulnerability Stress Adaptation (VSA; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) model, in addition to relationship processes that can contribute to relationship longevity, couples' enduring strengths that they bring into their relationship may help enhance the quality of the union. Black marriages in particular, have unique strengths and resources such as, an egalitarian approach toward role-sharing and household labor, participation in faith communities (Marks et al., 2008) and extended family support. However, gaps in the literature point to a need to understand personal strengths brought into the relationship that supports relationship stability and satisfaction. We know little about these dynamics among Black men and women. This study

explored how enduring strengths of Black couples may help manage the environment stress of discrimination in order to protect and maintain marriages.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Vulnerability Stress Adaptation Model

The Vulnerability Stress Adaptation (VSA; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) model of relationship dysfunction was used to conceptualize this study. According to the model (see Figure 1), individuals bring enduring or pre-existing vulnerabilities and strengths to their relationships such as personal traits (e.g., self-esteem, personality disorders) and experiences (e.g., parental divorce, prior relationship trauma). These enduring vulnerabilities and strengths influence how couples manage stressful events such as unemployment and the death of a child, and circumstances such as disabilities and poverty.

In order to cope with the stress, couples enter a process that can be either adaptive or maladaptive. These processes represent interactions between partners that develop as couples respond to stress. Interactions or behavioral exchanges may be positive or negative (e.g., problem-solving skills, arguments). Partners' enduring vulnerabilities and strengths, stress experienced within the relationship, and both adaptive and maladaptive coping are expected to affect relationship satisfaction and, ultimately, relationship stability. Couples that can effectively manage stressful events and adapt to changes to the couple system are presumed to buffer their relationships from the negative impact of stressful events. These couples then go on to enjoy their relationship together that in turn contributes to the longevity of the relationship.

Conversely, couples whose coping processes are maladaptive may struggle with protecting their relationship from stressful events. Consequently, the quality of the relationship may suffer, and couples may consider separation unless something changes for the better. Relationship satisfaction is assumed to decrease with acute life events, and these decreases are expected to be more drastic when chronic stress is high (Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005).

Applying the VSA model to Black couples can help with understanding the nature of both internal and external stress on the relationship (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Black couples have unique external stress of racial discrimination that is an enduring life-long stressor (e.g., Broman, Mavaddat, & Hsu, 2000; Borrell, Kiefe, Williams, Diez-Roux, & Gordon-Larsen, 2006). It is crucial for Black couples to be able to manage these stresses in order to protect their relationships. A slightly modified VSA model (see Figure 1) will be used in this study to examine how the enduring strength of self-compassion influences couples' use of negative communication (maladaptive process) to manage the stress of discrimination, and how openness to discuss issues may moderate the impact of maladaptive communication on relationship satisfaction.

Self-compassion and Relationships

Self-compassion refers to a kind and nurturing attitude toward oneself during situations that threaten one's adequacy while recognizing that being imperfect is part of being human (Homan, 2016). Self-compassion is supposedly more stable and less reliant on self-worth, anger, narcissism, social comparison and public self-consciousness making it a stronger predictor of appropriate self-relating than self-esteem (Neff, 2016). Main features of self-compassion include being kind toward oneself in instances of pain or failure, perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience, and holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness combine and interact when encountering personal mistakes, perceived inadequacies, or various experiences of life difficulty (Neff, 2016). Self-kindness entails being loving, gentle, and understanding toward oneself and involves actively soothing and comforting oneself in times of struggle. Common humanity involves connection to the experience of imperfection shared by all

humanity and being in touch with the reality that difficulties in life are a shared human experience rather than seeing oneself as a separate and unworthy individual. Being mindful refers to having a balanced, mindful response to distress that neither stifles and avoids, nor amplifies and ruminates on uncomfortable emotions.

Several studies found that self-compassion predicted mental health. Self-compassion was negatively associated with self-criticism, depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression, and neurotic perfectionism, and positively associated with life satisfaction and social connectedness (Neff, 2003). Further, self-compassion was found to be directly associated with individual psychological characteristics such as happiness, optimism, and life satisfaction (e.g., Neff, 2016) and predicted improved psychological health over time (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Homan (2016) found that self-compassion is positively and uniquely related to psychological well-being, and moderates the association between self-rated health and depression.

Self-compassion was further found to benefit not only the individual but their interpersonal relationships. Partners tended to be more satisfied in their relationships if their partners were self-compassionate (Neff, 2016). Partners also experienced greater psychological well-being in their relationships, felt more authentic, and experienced less turmoil when resolving relationship conflict (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Neff and Pommier (2013) found that self-compassion was linked to greater forgiveness, perspective taking, altruism, empathetic concern, and decreased personal distress in response to others' suffering. A recent study by Jacobson, Wilson, Kurz, and Kellum (2018) with 261 undergraduates found that self-compassion was moderately positively correlated with relationship quality though it was a weak predictor of

relationship quality. Given the role of self-compassion in relationships, it is expected that self-compassion will play an important role in enhancing relationship processes.

Negative Communication and Relationships

Stress has been associated with psychological and physical aggression, communication problems and relationship dissolution (e.g., Buck & Neff, 2012). Stress regardless of its source can influence the quality and stability of the relationship, depending on the ability of the couple to adapt to and cope with the stress (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). It is not uncommon for couples to use maladaptive forms of adaptation to process their stress that in turn, may be influenced by the type of stress and the couples' stable traits or enduring strengths and vulnerabilities (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). In general, the use of positive and adaptive communication can enhance relationships while maladaptive and negative forms of communication can be detrimental to the quality of romantic relationships (e.g., Dainton & Gross, 2008).

Behaviors that are destructive such as negative communication have been found to contribute to relationship dissatisfaction (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Couples may engage in negative interactions as they attempt to manage stress from the workplace, finances, relationships with extended family, or that stress from within their relationship. Negative relationship behaviors may include jealousy induction, avoidance, spying, infidelity, destructive conflict, and allowing control (Dainton & Gross, 2008). Given the potential destructive nature of negative communication patterns, it is expected that increased couple negative interaction would harm relationship quality.

The Role of Openness in Relationships

Openness, defined as self-disclosure and discussion of the nature of the relationship (Dainton, Stafford, & Canary, 1994) has been identified as a relationship process that can help

maintain relationships by its positive link to relationship satisfaction (Stafford & Canary, 1991). The role of openness in relationships have further been linked to commitment, whereby perceiving partners' use of openness predicted commitment (Dainton, 2015). The vulnerability required to be direct and explicit about one's feelings reflects the effort put into the relationship to maintain open communication that contributes to the resilience and longevity of relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1992).

The use of openness can predict relational characteristics that constituted relational quality, such as liking the partner, commitment to the relationship, and satisfaction (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 1992), as well as buffers of adverse consequences of stresses. Previous studies have found that openness can buffer the detrimental effects of discrimination experiences on the relationship satisfaction of Black partners married to White partners (Baptist et al., 2018). The authors found that when Black partners in these relationships experienced high levels of discrimination, openness within their relationships protected their relationship from being negatively affected. It appears that open communication with one's partner can reduce relational distress that may result from negative communication patterns.

Openly discussing and encouraging one's partner to discuss the state and future of one's relationship may have a similar impact on conflict as does feeling understood. Feeling understood during the conflict has been found to buffer against the negative impact of conflict on relationship satisfaction (Gordon & Chen, 2016). Openly discussing the state and future of one's relationship provides the opportunity for couples to understand each other. As such, openness can not only have a direct but buffering effect on relationship satisfaction. Feeling understood may contribute to the inclination to engage in more constructive conversations including effective conflict management, as opposed to maintaining negative communication patterns that

are detrimental to satisfaction (Gordon & Chen, 2016). Self-disclosure of both positive and negative sentiments that indicate couples' ability to communicate willingly can help couples' build connection and closeness (e.g., Laurenceau, 2005). It is expected that the opportunity to share one's feelings and point of view may buffer the harmful effects of conflict on relationships.

Purpose of This Study

Using the Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation Model, this study examined factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction for Black couples. More specifically, the study examined how self-compassion reduced couples' maladaptive coping (negative communication) that in turn reduced relationship satisfaction. The study further examined if couples' perceived couple discrimination increased couples' negative interaction and if open communication between couples increased their relationship satisfaction. This proposed moderated mediation common-fate model presented in Figures 2 and 3 will test the following hypothesis:

H1: Self-compassion will be negatively related to negative interaction and positively related to relationship satisfaction.

H2: Perceived couple discrimination will moderate the effects of self-compassion on negative interaction.

H3: The effects of self-compassion on couples' satisfaction is mediated by negative interaction that in turn is moderated by couples' openness.

Chapter 3 - Method

Participants

Participants included 210 married couples where both partners self-identified as Black or African-American that resided in the U.S. The average ages of the participants were 32.46 years ($SD = 5.04$) for husbands and 30.91 years ($SD = 4.90$) for wives. The couples had been married for an average of 8.15 years ($SD = 4.47$; Range: 8 months to 21.6 years) with an average of 1.91 ($SD = 1.22$; Range = 0 to 5) children. More than half of the participants had an Associate degree or higher (51.9% percent of husbands and 62.4% of wives). Close to half (49.5%) of all couples reported an annual household income of \$60,000 and more. More husbands were employed full-time outside the home (82.4%) compared to wives (52.4%).

Data Collection

This study utilized secondary cross-sectional dyadic data on relationship resilience that was collected online using Qualtrics Panel in 2016. Qualtrics Panel is particularly useful when collecting data from groups that are otherwise difficult to reach. The panels further allow researchers access to a more representative national sample. Qualtrics guaranteed complete data eliminating problems that can arise with missing data.

To be eligible, participants had to be in a heterosexual marriage where both partners self-identified as Black or African-American, reside in the U.S. and both partners willing and able to complete the online survey. Qualtrics charged \$19 for each couple they recruited from their panels. Based on funding, 210 couples were recruited by Qualtrics to participate in this study. Payments to the participants (undisclosed) were made by Qualtrics. After the contracted number of participants were met (i.e., 210 couples), the data was provided to the researcher who then

cleaned and prepared the data for analysis. This study was funded by the School of Family Studies and Human Services of the College of Human Ecology at Kansas State University.

Measures

The following measures assessed self-compassion, perceived couple discrimination, couple negative interaction, openness, and relationship satisfaction.

Self-compassion. The short form 12-item self-compassion scale (SCS; Neff, 2003; Raes, Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2011) was used to measure a single-factor of self-compassion. This scale has a close correlation with the original long form SCS of 26 items ($r = .97$) (Raes et al., 2011). Participants were asked to reflect on how they typically acted towards themselves during difficult times. Items include "I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like" and "I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies."

Participants respond to items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = almost never to 5 = almost always. We constructed the mean summary ranging from 1 to 5 so that higher scores were associated with higher levels of self-compassion. The long form SCS has been found to have good convergent (Neff, 2016), predictive and discriminate validity that is not associated with social desirability (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion was not significantly correlated with narcissisms and was a stronger negative predictor of social comparison and contingent upon self-worth (Neff & Vonk, 2009). The Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .67 for husbands and .65 for wives.

Perceived Couple Discrimination. The Everyday Discrimination Scale (EDS, Williams, Yan, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997) modified by Trail, Goff, Bradbury, and Karney, (2012) in their study on couples was used to assess experiences of perceived couple discrimination. The

modified scale included six of the nine original items. Participants were asked “How often have you and your partner experienced the following types of discrimination because you are a Black couple?: 1) treated as inferior, 2) people acting fearful of you, 3) treated with less respect than others, 4) people treating you as if you have been dishonest, 5) insulted or received name-calling, and 6) threatened or harassed” based on a Likert scale of 1 (Never) to 4 (Often). A mean summary score of 1 to 4 was constructed with higher scores indicating a higher frequency of perceived discrimination. This six-item scale's Cronbach's alphas were .75 (husbands) and .69 (wives) (Trail et al., 2012). The original nine-item scale demonstrated strong convergent validity with distress, anger and hostility scales (Gonzales et al., 2016). Cronbach's alpha demonstrated the scales' reliability (.93 and .92 for husbands and wives respectively).

Couple Negative Interaction. The 4-item Communication Danger Signs Scale (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010) was used to assess couples' negative interaction. Participants rated the frequency of their partners' escalation, negative interpretation, withdrawal, and invalidation. Items included “My partner criticizes or belittles my opinions, feelings, or desires,” and “My partner seems to view my words or actions more negatively than I mean them to be,” and was rated using a Likert-type scale from 1 = never to 6 = all the time. A mean summary ranging from 1 to 6 was constructed, with higher scores reflecting more negative interactions in the relationship. Cronbach’s alpha for this sample indicated that the scale was reliable (husbands = .83 and wives = .82).

Openness in Relationship. The six-item openness subscale from the Relationship Maintenance Strategies Measure (RMSM, Canary & Stafford, 1992) measured relationship talks and self-disclosure. Participants reflected upon the last two weeks and respond to statements such as, “I have encouraged my partner to disclose his/her thoughts and feelings to me” and “My

partner has simply told me how s/he felt about our relationship,” using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree) to 5 = Strongly agree. A mean summary ranging from 1 to 5 was constructed, with higher scores reflecting more openness in the relationship. The RMSM has been found to have good reliability ($\alpha = .78$) and convergent construct validity with greater happiness (Chonody, Killian, Gabb, & Dunk-West, 2016). The Openness subscale’s Cronbach’s alpha for this sample indicated that the scale was reliable (husbands = .84 and wives = .85).

Relationship Satisfaction. The four-item Couple Satisfaction Inventory (CSI-4; Funk & Rogge, 2007) measured relationship satisfaction. Participants rated how statements such as, “I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner” and “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” were true for their relationship using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = Not at all true to 7 = Completely true. A mean summary ranging from 1 to 7 was constructed, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. The CSI was found to demonstrate strong convergent and construct validity with other satisfaction measures (Funk & Rogers, 2007). Cronbach’s alpha for this sample indicated that the scale was reliable (husbands = .93 and wives = .94).

Control Variables. The proposed model was tested after controlling for age (in years), income level (in increments of \$20,000), number of children, and duration of marriage (in months). All variables were continuous.

Data Analysis

Preliminary analysis. Data was examined for completeness and normality (i.e., skewness and kurtosis). Acceptable levels of skewness and kurtosis was $|3|$ and $|10|$ respectively (Kline, 2011). Bivariate correlations among study variables and between spouses were analyzed using SPSS version 25 (IBM Corporation, 2018).

Main analysis. Given the interdependence within couple relationships, it was anticipated that reports on the perceived of couple discrimination, negative interaction and relationship satisfaction would be highly correlated. In order to capture the shared variance of these variables, a common-fate variable was created (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). This process entailed using a latent variable to capture the shared reports of perceived discrimination, negative interaction and relationship satisfaction, where the factor loadings indicated the portion of the shared variance contributed by each partner.

The statistical common-fate moderated mediation model (presented in Figure 3), was tested using MPlus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). Mediation examined whether a relation between two variables (self-compassion and relationship) occurred because of an indirect effect by a third variable (couple negative interaction). Moderated mediation assessed the strength of the mediation model under different conditions of openness, known as the conditional indirect effect (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). All variables were mean-centered to avoid the probability of high multicollinearity with the interaction variable (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991).

The analysis began with estimating a measurement model to ensure the model fit. MPlus code for analysis was adapted from Stride, Gardner, Catley, and Thomas' (2015) 'MPlus codes for mediation, moderation, and moderated mediation models.' Evidence of acceptable fit between the model and the observed data was determined by a non-significant Chi-square, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) values of above .95, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of below .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). This analysis was followed with the estimation of the structural model with the latent interaction terms and comparing it with the measurement model. Because latent moderated structural equations do not generate model fit indices such as RMSEA, CFI, and TLI, the overall model fit was measured

using a chi-square difference test (TRd) based on log-likelihood values and scaling correction factors obtained with the robust maximum likelihood estimator.

Chapter 4 - Results

Preliminary Analysis

Skewness and kurtosis ranged from -1.4 to 1.5, indicating normality in the distribution of all variables included in this study. Correlation results, presented in Table 2 indicate that both husbands' and wives' self-compassion and openness related positively to relationship satisfaction. Experiencing higher self-compassion was related to higher reports of satisfaction in their relationships. Encouraging one's partner to share openly was related to higher levels of satisfaction with their relationships. Further, self-compassion and satisfaction were inversely related to negative interaction for both husbands and wives. Higher levels of self-compassion were related to lower reports of negative interaction in the relationship, and higher levels of negative interaction were linked to lower relationship satisfaction.

Only for husbands was self-compassion inversely related to perceiving couple discrimination. We found an association of husbands having higher levels of self-compassion with husbands' perceiving less discrimination. Only for wives was openness inversely related to negative interaction. Wives' whose husbands encouraged open communication reported fewer negative interactions in their relationships.

Husbands' and wives' self-compassion, negative interaction, openness, the perception of couple discrimination and relationship satisfaction were highly intercorrelated. These results reflect the non-independence of the couple, supporting the use of common-fate latent variables that accounted for the couples' interdependence. Factor loadings of latent variables are presented in Table 3.

Measurement Model

Results of the analysis estimating the model fit of the measurement model (with no interaction terms) controlling for age, income level, number of children, and duration of relationship, indicated marginally acceptable model fit (CFI = .95, TLI = .93, Chi-square = 81.44, $p = .003$, RMSEA = .05). Subsequently, control variables were sequentially removed to improve model fit. Model fit improved slightly after removing age (CFI = .96, TLI = .94, Chi-square = 64.69, $p = .008$, RMSEA = .05) after removing age and income level, the model fit improved further (CFI = .96, TLI = .95, Chi-square = 56.63, $p = .01$, RMSEA = .05) indicating that the model fit was good for the observed data. Results of this measurement model (Model 1) are presented in Table 3.

Structural Model

Model 1 was compared to the structural model (Model 2) that included interaction terms. TRd was computed using the log-likelihood values of -1460.05 (Model 1) and -1449.06 (Model 2), scaling correction factors of 1.14 (Model 1) and 1.22 (Model 2) and free parameters of 28 (Model 1) and 32 (Model 2). The TRd of 12.36 for 4 df was statistically significant at the .05 level, suggesting that Model 2 better fit the observed data compared to Model 1. Hence, Model 2 explained more of the variance in negative interaction [R^2 increased from 22 (Model 1) to 53 (Model 2)] and satisfaction [R^2 increased from 42 (Model 1) to 73 (Model 2)] than Model 1. The unstandardized results of Model 2 are presented in Table 3.

H1: Self-compassion will be negatively related to couple negative interaction and positively related to relationship satisfaction. H1 was partially supported. Self-compassion was inversely related to negative interactions for both wives ($b = -.25$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $-.35$, $-.15$), and husbands ($b = -.21$, $p = .002$, 95% CI = $-.32$, $-.10$), but not related to satisfaction for

either partner. The results suggested that when either partner experienced more self-compassion, they were less likely to engage in destructive forms of communication with each other and vice versa. The higher a partners' level of self-compassion, the lower the levels of negative interactions in the relationship. However, no significant association between relationship satisfaction and self-compassion for either partner was evident.

H2: Perceived couple discrimination will moderate the effect of self-compassion on negative interaction. H2 was partially supported. Perceived couple discrimination did not moderate the effects of self-compassion on negative interaction for husbands ($b = .05, p = .55, 95\% \text{ CI} = -.08, .18$). Husbands appeared to be unperturbed by their perception of discrimination. Results indicated that husbands' level of self-compassion was not significantly related to the quality of communication when they perceived discrimination. Perceived couple discrimination did not change the relationship between husbands' level of self-compassion and negative interaction. Even with perceived couple discrimination present, there was no statistically significant decrease in husbands' ability to manage both perceived discrimination and negative interactions.

In contrast, wives' self-compassion was significantly related to negative interaction ($b = -.25, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = -.35, -.15$), and perceived discrimination significantly moderated that relationship ($b = -.20, p = .008, 95\% \text{ CI} = -.32, -.07$). When wives perceived discrimination, self-compassion, an enduring strength, appeared suppressed. For wives, the extent self-compassion was related to couples' communication patterns fluctuated depending on the amount of discrimination perceived. The more wives perceived discrimination, the more the couple engaged in destructive communication patterns. In other words, when perceived couple

discrimination was present, there was a statistically significant decrease in wives' ability to manage both perceived discrimination and negative interactions.

H3: The effects of self-compassion on couples' satisfaction is mediated by negative interaction that in turn is moderated by couples' openness. H3 was partially supported.

Couples who experienced more negative interactions reported lower relationship satisfaction ($b = -.38, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = -.57, -.20$). Negative interaction appeared to suppress the otherwise positive effects of self-compassion on relationship satisfaction. There was a link in negative interactions ability to reduce relationship satisfaction even in the presence of the individual strength of self-compassion. The evidence that this relationship varied based on openness was significant and varied based on level of openness for wives ($b = .22, p = .003, 95\% \text{ CI} = .10, .35$) but not husbands ($b = -.03, p = .76, 95\% \text{ CI} = -.21, .14$).

Moderated mediation or conditional indirect effects: A formal test of the indirect effect of wives' self-compassion on relationship satisfaction through negative interaction revealed significant indirect effects when wives reported either low or moderate openness. Results further indicated that the effects of self-compassion through negative interaction on relationship satisfaction fluctuated depending on the level of discrimination perceived and wives' report of openness. Because negative interaction was inversely related to relationship satisfaction ($b = -.38$), a positive moderating effect meant an increase in the adverse effect on relationship satisfaction. In other words, as the moderating effect increased, higher levels of negative interaction were related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. These interactions are illustrated in Figures 5 (moderate or mean openness) and 6 (low or 1 *SD* below the mean openness). Coefficient scores for indirect and total effects are presented in Table 4. The association between wives' self-compassion and negative interaction was negative, but when

openness was high, the association between self-compassion and relationship satisfaction was positive. Openness seems to serve as a protective factor for wives when perceived discrimination is low or moderate and there were low levels of negative interaction in the relationship. Perceived discrimination served as a risk factor for wives when openness was low and negative interaction was high.

Results in Table 4 indicated that when wives experienced low openness in their relationships and below average levels of perceived discrimination ($b = .19, Z = 2.14, p = .006, 95\% \text{ CI} = .04, .33$), their satisfaction with their relationships declined $-.07 (.19 \times -.38)$ for each unit of perceived discrimination. However, when perceived discrimination was above average, the interaction between negative interaction and openness ($b = .36, Z = 2.86, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = .16, .58$) changed relationship satisfaction by $-.13 (.36 \times -.38)$. In other words, lower perceived discrimination was related to higher relationship satisfaction through negative interaction compared to higher levels of perceived discrimination. These same effects, but with a smaller magnitude of change in relationship satisfaction were indicated when wives experienced moderate levels of openness.

When wives' reported average levels of openness, perceiving above average levels of discrimination ($b = .23, Z = 2.74, p = .006, 95\% \text{ CI} = .09, .37$) changed relationship satisfaction by $-.09 (.23 \times -.38)$ and when wives perceived below average discrimination ($b = .12, Z = 2.02, p = .04, 95\% \text{ CI} = .02, .21$), relationship satisfaction changed by $-.04 (.12 \times -.38)$. These results suggested that the mediating effect of negative interaction continued even when openness fluctuated, and wives' experience of openness may enhance relationships even when the couple perceived discrimination. These results verified the conditional indirect effect of the proposed model.

The total effects on relationship satisfaction considering both the direct effects from self-compassion to relationship satisfaction and the moderating effects of perceived discrimination and the moderated mediation effects of openness for mean levels of perceived discrimination and openness are presented in Table 4. The results indicate that relationship satisfaction was dependent on the fluctuations in both openness in relationships and perceived discrimination. The extent self-compassion was related to relationship satisfaction was dependent on the amount of racial discrimination couples perceived and the level of openness in their relationships. For wives who experienced average levels of perceived discrimination and openness in their relationships, for every unit of self-compassion, relationship satisfaction changed by .26 ($b = .26$, $Z = 3.10$, $p = .002$, 95% CI = .12, .40). The change in satisfaction was not significant when openness was above average regardless of the couples' perceived levels of discrimination. These results suggested that wives' relationship satisfaction was sensitive to changes in perceived couple discrimination only when openness in the relationship was below or at average levels.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The study examined how the enduring strength of self-compassion may buffer the effects of discrimination perceived by Black couples that in turn, can have a detrimental effect on couples' communication patterns. Further, the role of open communication as a potential moderator of the consequences of maladaptive communication patterns on relationship satisfaction was examined.

The results indicate that for both spouses, self-compassion is linked with a reduction of maladaptive communication patterns in the relationship. This findings supports current literature where being kind toward oneself in instances of pain, perceiving one's experiences as part of the broader human experience (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007) and decreased personal distress in response to others' suffering (Neff & Pommier, 2013), contributes to less turmoil when resolving relationship conflict (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Further, self-compassion has been found to serve as a buffer or protective factor against harmful effects of low self-esteem (Marshall et al., 2015), depression (Ford, Klibert, Tarantino, & Lamis, 2017), and adverse psychological functioning (Neff et al., 2018).

Second, although perceived discrimination do not appear to affect couples' satisfaction with their relationships directly, the experience itself has the potential to change how self-compassion relates to maladaptive couple processes. This effect was particularly poignant for wives in this study. When wives experience average to above average levels of perceived discrimination, self-compassion's ability to lessen negative interactions was suppressed. These findings are not true when wives' experience below average levels of perceived discrimination perhaps because wives are not distressed by low levels of perceived discrimination. It appears

that self-compassion can serve as an important resource for relationships until wives perceive more than the average level of discrimination. The findings illustrate how wives' enduring strengths of self-compassion may not be sufficient to counter the effects of external stresses in the likes of perceived discrimination. These findings contradict previous studies that noted how self-compassion could help decrease any potential distress from perceived discrimination (Flynn, 2017). Even though self-compassion is an enduring strength that can minimize internal relationship stress, it may not be as effective against external stresses. Furthermore, self-compassion has been found to vary by gender. Women were found to report having significantly less self-compassion than men which may be due to women's greater tendency to be self-critical and to ruminate on their negative thoughts (e.g., Reilly, Rochlen, & Awad, 2014; Yarnell, & Neff 2013). This could mean that self-compassion serves as a buffer against internal and external stressors for husbands but not for wives.

Third, findings further indicate that negative communication, a form of a maladaptive coping process can negatively affect relationship satisfaction and suppress the positive contributions of self-compassion in reducing destructive communication. The literature supports our findings that couples who experienced more negative interactions reported lower relationship satisfaction. Many studies report the deleterious effects of daily negative interaction as it relates to decreased levels of relationship satisfaction (Falconier et al., 2015; Lei et al., 2016). For wives, it appears that open communication can buffer the effects of maladaptive communication on couples' relationships. These findings are supported by Gordon and Chen (2016) who found that perceived understanding buffers against the negative impact of conflict on relationship satisfaction.

The extent that open communication in relationships prevents deterioration in relationship quality for wives appears to depend on both the degree of openness in their relationship and perceived couple discrimination. Higher levels of perceived discrimination or either average or below average openness in relationships are linked with a reduction in relationship satisfaction. The role of open communication appears to be a significant contributor to the quality of relationships for wives. When wives report above average levels of openness in their relationships, regardless of the couples' perceived discrimination, wives' satisfaction with their relationship would be remain intact. Given that women's relational satisfaction is often key to both partners being satisfied within the relationship (e.g., Gager & Sanchez, 2003), it is important to assess the underlying reasons openness is such a strong predictor for women and not for men.

Openness may be more prevalent for women according to research that found women are more negatively affected by avoidance than men (Afifi, McManus, Steuber, & Coho, 2009). This could be from social norms and standards that suggest women have different standards for openness in romantic relationships and are prepared to process emotions and experiences through communication rather than avoid conflict or suppress emotions. Women are socialized to be relationship-oriented and openness is often equated with healthy relationships in Western society (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2012). Therefore, openness may not be the best predictor for men in romantic relationships to determine relationship satisfaction. Men may possess different individual strengths they bring into the relationship that are not adequately addressed in relationships research due to society perceptions and norms. In the research literature, husbands generally tend to report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than wives (e.g., Jackson,

Miller, Oka, & Henry, 2014). Therefore, men may not be as affected by internal and external stress as their counterparts.

Studies with interracial Black-White couples have found that open communication can serve as a protective factor against the perception discrimination on relationship satisfaction (Baptist et al., 2018). There is a reciprocal relationship with openness and open communication. Once open individuals receive emotional support then they are more likely to respond with openness (McCrae & Sutin, 2009). This dynamic reciprocal interaction likely deepens the emotional bond between individuals. Therefore, openness could serve as a protective factor against internal and external stressors over time as the cycle continues. This pattern can strengthen the couple's bond, as the levels of open communication in the relationship grow.

The components of the VSA model proved to be helpful as a framework to understand better the management of stress in Black couples. Extending the model to include a relationship process to moderate the impact of maladaptive processes (or enhance adaptive processes) provided a more comprehensive view of how couples can manage internal stresses in order to maintain and enhance their relationships. As a maintenance strategy, openness has been found to contribute to better quality relationships. However, in cultures where expressing emotions and confronting others is frowned upon, openness may not enhance relationships as they do in the U.S. Being mindful of this difference and how cultures can differ in how they value open communication would be necessary. Other forms of relationship processes that will allow couples the opportunity to discuss differences amicably would be necessary.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, cross-sectional studies do not allow the examination of the temporal ordering of variables that limit the ability to make predictions.

Furthermore, because relationships are not static, the inclusion of multiple time points would facilitate a better understanding of how relationships change over time. Second, the reliance on self-report has its setbacks. While it is expected that participants meet the criteria of the study, there is always the risk that paid online surveys where the identity of participants are cannot be verified, risk attracting imposters. Supplementing online research with in-person data collection that can be used to verify data collected online.

Third, the relatively young age group of couples with an average age of participants in their 30's may have skewed the data. Younger couples tend to report being more satisfied in their relationships (Hardie, & Lucas, 2010), and may have not experienced that same kind of discrimination such as during the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, participants may not have the same experiences of discrimination (Broman et al., 2000; Bratter, & Gorman, 2011) or their experiences of discrimination are much different from previous generations. Future studies should make concerted efforts to include a broader range of age groups that can potentially provide a comparison group of long-term married Black couples.

Fourth, not controlling for geographical location could have an impact on the perceived discrimination variable. For instance, Black couples living in Black-dominated neighborhoods would expect to perceive less discrimination (Wright & Holloway, 2011) compared to a Black couples living in a predominantly White suburb. Future studies on Black couples and discrimination should assess for participants geographical location – both work and residents – and enquire about the type and frequency of discrimination encountered.

Fifth, replicating this study with a larger and more representative sample would allow the inclusion of other relevant constructs and variables. Previous research suggests that religiosity is an essential strength for Black couples. Therefore, adding religion and spirituality as a buffer or

control in future research would be recommended as this factor is essential in Black couples. Social support is another cultural factor that is especially important for Black couples. Black couples and families tend to adhere to a more collectivist culture and rely heavily on each other. Black families often have a fictive kin network and elective kin included in the family unit. Including this resource in research may contribute to a better understanding of Black families. The addition of other relationship and family factors and enduring personal strengths may help tease out factors that contribute to Black men's management of racial discrimination. Studies should also examine how single Black men and women manage racial discrimination and prevent stress from acts of discrimination to affect their health and overall well-being.

There is a need for a greater focus on Black couples in our literature, especially regarding strengths-based processes. In the past decade, a handful of emerging studies have provided insights into factors that promote healthy relationships among Black couples (e.g., Bryant et al., 2010). This research domain is emerging, and more studies using more substantial, more representative samples are needed.

Clinical Implications

The findings from this study have implications for clinicians working with Black clients and any other minority groups that experience or perceive discrimination. First, it is essential to assess experiences of discrimination when working with ethnic minority clients, and especially Black clients. Periodically assessing for experiences of discrimination should be done because it may take time for clients to build trust and feel comfortable to disclose. Assessment should include direct and indirect discrimination in school, workplace, and community. It would be essential to provide clients a safe place to process their experience and develop strategies to manage discrimination effectively. Clinicians should help couples to develop strategies together

to counter discrimination and to efficiently process their experiences with each other to prevent the issue from seeping into their relationship.

The findings support the role of personal strength as a protective mechanism against external stresses. Clinicians can help clients identify their strengths and encourage clients to develop further and utilize these strengths to cope and deal with discrimination. Clinicians should also help clients develop practical communication skills for conflict management and to better processes stresses with each other. Clients should be encouraged to develop ways to unburden their stress while protecting their relationships. Clients may need coaching in sharing openly and encourage one's partner to be forthcoming. The speaker-listener technique commonly used in most couple therapy models is highly encouraged as an intervention to promote openness and develop trust and connection in relationships.

Given the findings in this study, it is unclear what the needs of men are. Having self-compassion appears to be a strength in helping women manage stress and avoid engaging in destructive forms of communication with their partners. Further, men in this study appear to encourage their partners to engage in conversation and share. For men, their ability to remain connected with their partners is not affected by the discrimination they may face. Self-compassion appears to be a useful trait for these men. Hence, when working with Black and ethnic minority men, developing self-compassion is encouraged.

Conclusion

This study suggests that high levels of openness and self-compassion can serve as a protective factor against perceived couple discrimination and couple negative interactions in Black couples. This is important because clinicians can now focus on strengthening these relationships by pointing out the positive personal and relationship traits and addressing specific

risk factors that are unique to Black couples. This research expands the research on relationship and dyadic interactional processes of Black couples that purposely address issues pertinent to Black couples and families. This research addresses the need for more strength-based approaches when researching ways to enhance ethnically diverse couple relationships.

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Figures and Tables

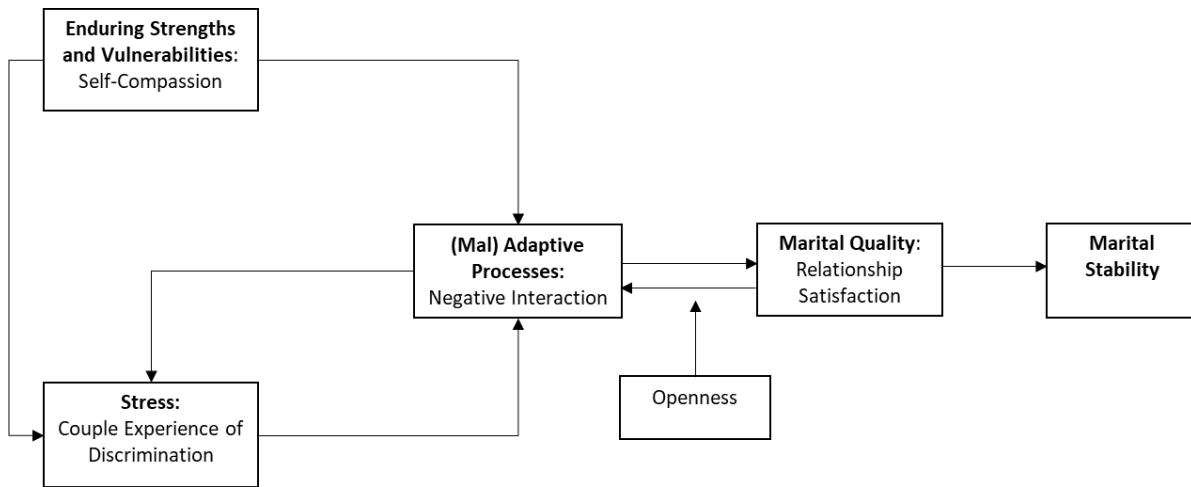


Figure 1. The Vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VSA) model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Variables examined in this study are as shown in the model. The model was modified to include openness as a moderator.

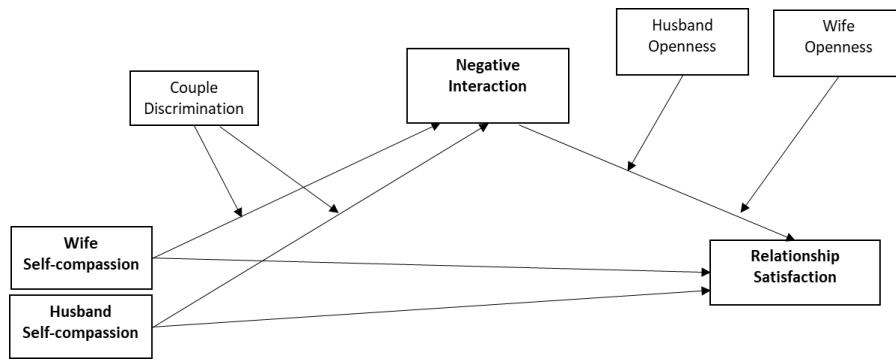


Figure 2. Model diagram of the proposed common-fate moderated mediation model of relationship satisfaction for Black couples

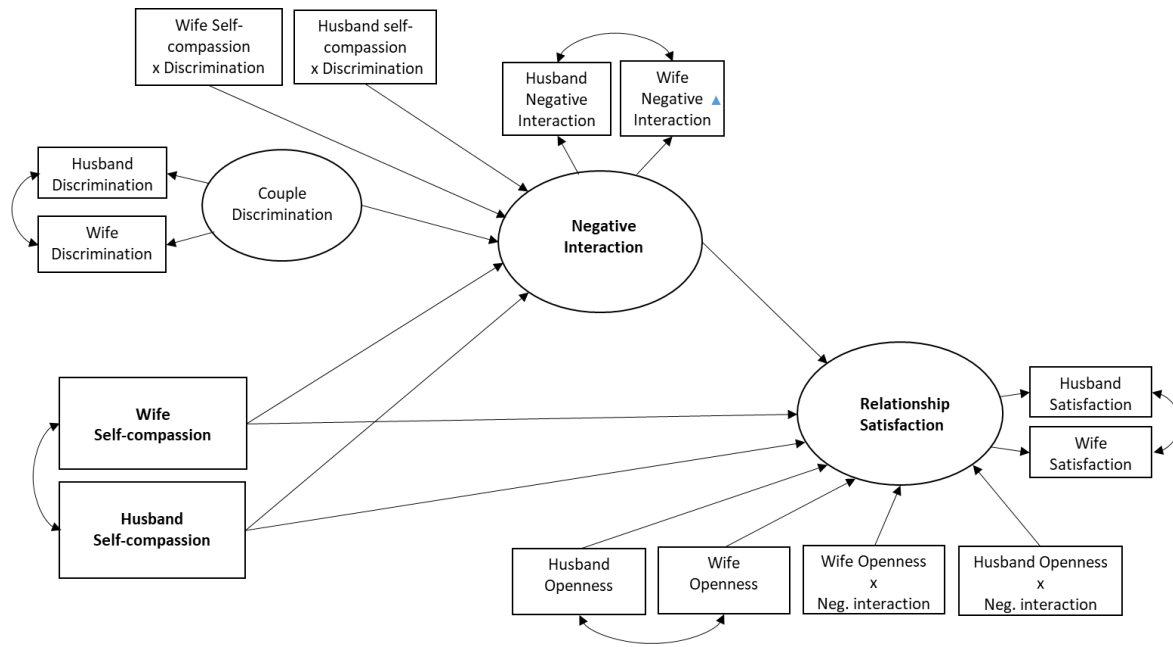


Figure 3. Statistical diagram of the proposed common-fate moderated mediation model of relationship satisfaction for Black couples

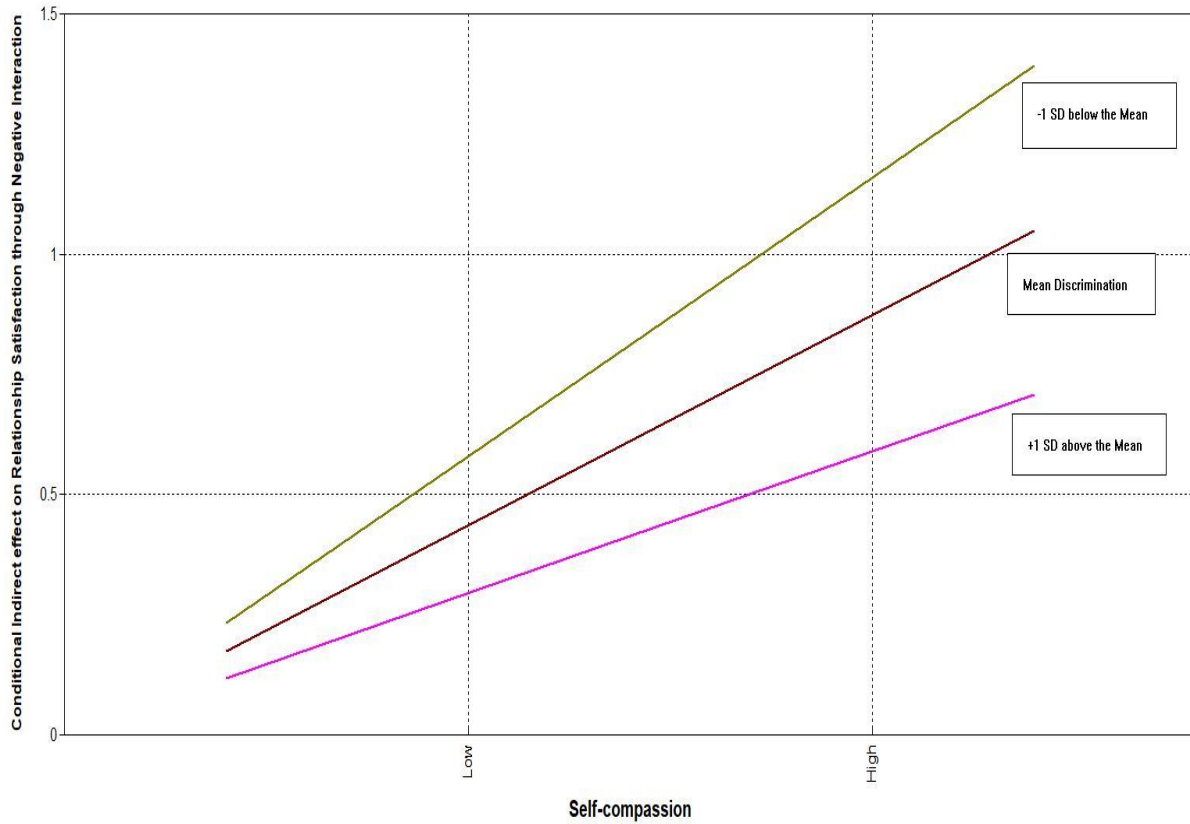


Figure 4. Graphic representation of the moderating effects of openness on wives' self-compassion to negative interaction to relationship satisfaction and the link between perceived couple discrimination when openness is moderate (at the mean)

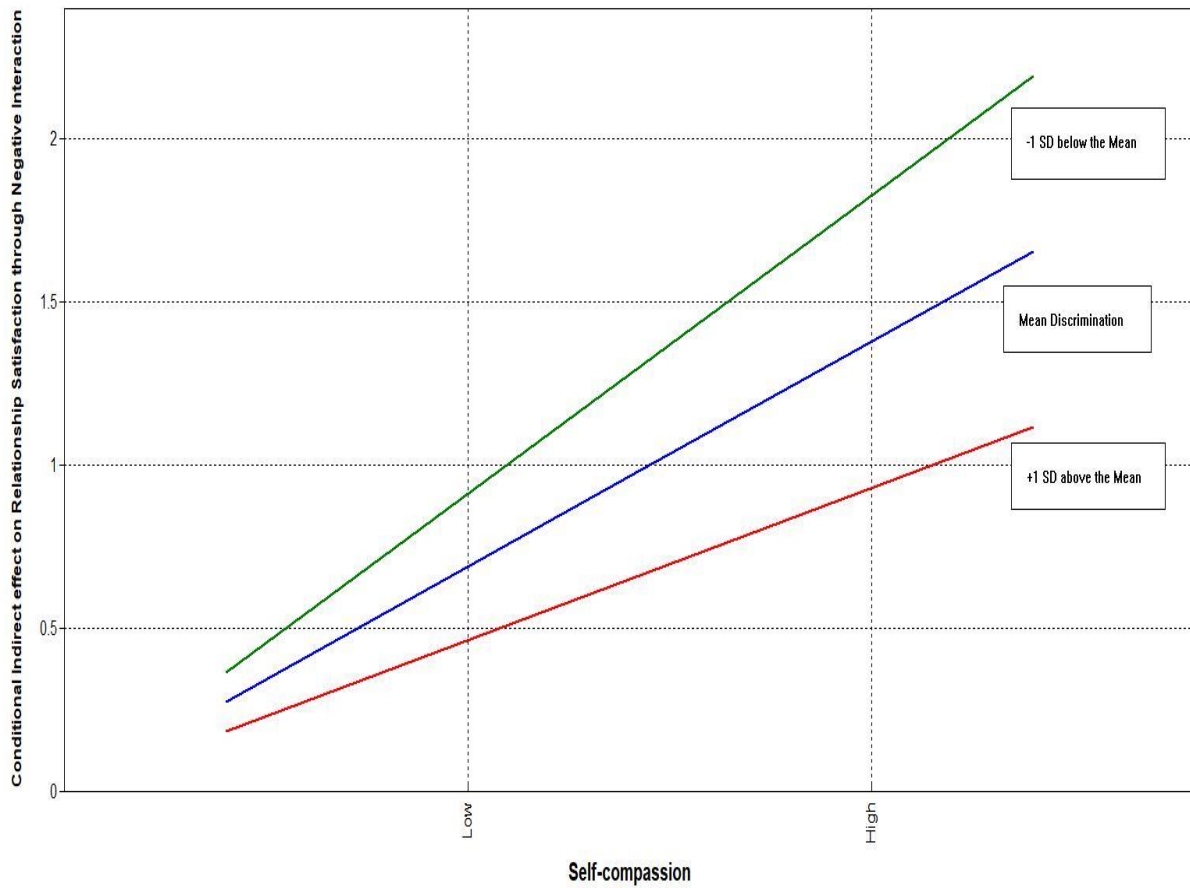


Figure 5. Graphic representation of the moderating effects of openness on wives' self-compassion to negative interaction to relationship satisfaction and the link between perceived couple discrimination when openness is low (-1 *SD* below the mean)

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=210)*

Variables		Husbands		Wives	
		<i>M or %</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M or %</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age (Husband, R = 19 to 40; Wife, R = 21 to 40)		32.46	5.04	30.91	4.90
Education:	Less than high school	2.9%	-	0.5%	-
	High School Diploma/GED	21.0%	-	11.4%	-
	Some College	24.8%	-	24.8%	-
	2-year degree	11.9%	-	12.9%	-
	4-year degree	30.5%	-	34.3%	-
	Graduate Degree	9.5%	-	15.2%	-
Employment:	Full-time outside the home	82.4%	-	52.4%	-
	Part-time outside the home	6.7%	-	11.0%	-
	Full-time homemaker	2.9%	-	26.2%	-
	Unemployed/Seeking employment	3.3%	-	7.6%	-
	On disability	3.3%	-	1.0%	-
	Student	1.4%	-	1.9%	-
Household					
Number of children (R = 0 to 5)		1.91	1.22		
Length of relationship (years) (R = .67 to 21.6)		8.15	4.47		
Income Level:	Less than 19,999	5.7%	-		
	\$20,000-\$39,999	21.4%	-		
	\$40,000-\$59,999	23.3%	-		
	\$60,000-\$79,999	24.3%	-		
	\$80,000-\$99,999	12.3%	-		
	\$100,000 or Above	12.9%	-		

Table 2. *Summary Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics of Husbands' and Wives' Study Variables (N = 210)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Self-Compassion	.33 ^{***}	-.14 [*]	-.32 ^{***}	0.12	.34 ^{***}
Couple-Discrimination	-0.07	.79 ^{***}	0.08	-0.08	-0.08
Negative Interaction	-.36 ^{***}	0.12	.73 ^{***}	0.04	-.36 ^{***}
Openness	0.13	0.07	-.22 ^{***}	.32 ^{***}	.23 ^{***}
Satisfaction	.24 ^{***}	0.08	-.44 ^{***}	.48 ^{***}	.69 ^{***}
Mean (SD) - Husbands	3.36 (.60)	1.89 (.81)	2.78 (1.35)	4.01 (.83)	5.22(1.08)
Wives	3.23 (.57)	1.89 (.77)	2.75 (1.35)	3.73 (.96)	5.00 (1.21)
Range	1 – 5	1 – 4	1 - 6	1 – 5	1 - 6

Note: Husbands = above diagonal. Wives = below diagonal. Couple Discrimination = Perceived Couple Discrimination. Intercorrelations between husbands and wives = along the diagonal. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. *Unstandardized Results of Indirect and Total Effects Derived from Changes in Moderating Variables*

Paths	Model 1			Model 2		95% CI
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	
<i>Shared Variables:</i>						
Couple Discrimination: Husband	.00	.00	.94***	1.00***	.00	1.00, 1.00
Wife	.89	.36	.84***	1.00***	.20	.66, 1.33
Negative Interaction: Husband	.00	.00	.80***	1.00***	.00	1.00, 1.00
Wife	.15	.11	.92***	1.11***	.12	.92, 1.31
Relationship Satisfaction: Husband	.00	.00	.74***	1.00***	.00	1.00, 1.00
Wife	.25	.18	.92***	1.24***	.20	.91, 1.24
<i>Paths to Negative Interaction:</i>						
	$R^2 = .22, p < .001$			$R^2 = .53, p < .001$		
Husband self-compassion	-.23	.06	-.26***	-.21**	.07	-.32, -.15
Wife self-compassion	-.21	.06	-.29***	-.25***	.06	-.32, -.10
Couple Discrimination	.10	.07	.12	.12	.07	.003, .25
Husband self-comp. x Couple Discr.				-.05	.08	-.08, .18
Wife self-comp. x Couple Discr.				-.20**	.07	-.32, -.07
Relationship Length	.001	.001	.05	.001	.001	-.001, .002
Number of Children	.05	.05	.07	.06	.05	-.02, .13
<i>Paths to Relationship Satisfaction:</i>						
	$R^2 = .42, p < .001$			$R^2 = .73, p < .001$		
Husband self-compassion	.06	.05	.08	.06	.05	-.02, .14
Wife self-compassion	.02	.04	.03	.03	.04	-.04, .10
Negative Interaction	-.38	.10	-.41***	-.38***	.11	-.57, -.20
Husband Openness	.07	.07	.10	.11	.06	.01, .21
Wife Openness	.27	.06	.38***	.20***	.06	.11, .29
Husband Openness x Neg. Int.				-.03	.11	-.21, .14
Wife Openness x Neg. Int.				.22**	.07	.10, .35

Fit Indices: Log-likelihood	-1460.05	-1449.06
AIC	2976.11	2962.13
BIC	3069.82	3069.23
Chi-square	56.63 ($p = .01$)	
RMSEA	.05	
CFI	.96	
TLI	.95	

Note. Couple Discrimination = Perceived Couple Discrimination. Discr. = Discrimination. Neg. Int. = Negative interaction. Comp. = Compassion. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. *Unstandardized and Standardized Results of the Proposed Moderated Mediation Model*

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Z</i>	95% CI
<i>Indirect effects:</i>				
Low Openness: Low discrimination	.19*	.09	2.14	.04, .33
Moderate discrimination	.28***	.09	3.20	.13, .42
High discrimination	.36**	.12	2.86	.16, .58
Moderate Openness: Low discrimination	.12*	.06	2.02	.02, .21
Moderate discrimination	.18**	.06	2.94	.08, .27
High discrimination	.23**	.08	2.74	.09, .37
<i>Total effects:</i>				
Moderate Discrimination: Low Openness	.36***	.11	3.25	.18, .55
Moderate Openness	.26**	.08	3.10	.12, .40
High Openness	.16*	.07	2.29	.05, .28
Moderate Openness: Low discrimination	.21*	.08	2.51	.07, .34
Moderate discrimination	.26**	.08	3.10	.12, .40
High discrimination	.32**	.11	3.02	.15, .50

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Appendix A

Informed Consent

Thank you for your interest in our study titled "Resilience in Black Couples." Please review the following before beginning the survey. By proceeding, you agree to voluntarily participate in the study.

The study is conducted by Joyce Baptist, Associate Professor (jbaptist@ksu.edu, 785-532-6891) and Zenova Williams, Doctoral Student (zwilliams@ksu.edu) at Kansas State University. You may contact us for any questions pertaining to the study.

The study is approved by Kansas State University's Institutional Regulatory Board (#8590). The contact person is Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-322

The purpose of the study is to identify factors that contribute to resilience in Black marriages. For this, we require both partners in the marriage to complete an anonymous survey that asks general demographic, and individual and relationship process questions.

To the participant, you and your partner will need to: be able to complete this survey, identify as Black, be married, be between 18 to 40 years old, have access to the internet, be able to read English and be a U.S. resident. Qualtrics pays a compensation fee for completion of the survey. Once data collection is completed by Qualtrics, the data will be made available to us with no identifying information. Hence, your identity will not be known to the researchers at Kansas State University.

It is possible that by discussing relationship or individual social experiences you may become mildly uneasy or question specific experiences in your relationship. It is not our intention to elicit distressful responses; however, self-reflection regarding some of the topics about identity and relationship may cause emotional discomfort.

It is possible that by completing the survey, you may recognize or discover new aspects of your identity and the interactions in their relationship. Your participation can help contribute to greater understanding of Black couple relationships and ways to promote their success.

By proceeding to the survey, you agree to voluntarily participate in the study. Please answer all the questions as best as you can.