

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: COMPARING MEMBERS OF INTERRACIAL AND SAME-RACE CLINICAL COUPLES: CONFLICT AND STEPS TOWARD LEAVING THE RELATIONSHIP

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Past research on marital divorce rates indicates that interracial couples are more likely to divorce than same-race couples. There has been speculation that this higher rate of relationship dissolution stems from larger differences in partners' backgrounds, values, and culture. These differences may contribute to higher levels of conflict in interracial relationships. The present study compared conflict levels reported by members of interracial and same-race couples in a clinical sample, using secondary data from couples receiving treatment at the Center for Healthy Families, a clinic at the University of Maryland, College Park. Members of interracial couples reported higher overall conflict, and higher conflict in specific areas, as well as more steps taken toward leaving their relationships than those in same-race couples. Higher conflict mediated group differences in steps taken to leave the relationship. Constructive couple communication did not moderate the association between couple type and level of conflict.

COMPARING MEMBERS OF INTERRACIAL AND SAME-RACE CLINICAL
COUPLES: CONFLICT AND STEPS TOWARD LEAVING THE RELATIONSHIP

by

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Statement of the Problem

The rate of intermarriage in the United States has been on the rise since the 1970s, since anti-miscegenation laws were removed in 1967 as a result of a Supreme Court decision (*Loving v. Virginia*, 1967; Sollars, 2000). According to the Pew Research Center's Social and Demographic Trends project, interracial marriages currently make up 7.8% of marriages in the United States, and 15% of new marriages take place between two people of different ethnic or racial origins (Pew Research, 2012). This is more than double the number of interracial marriages among newly married couples in 1980 (6.7%). This increase in intermarriage reflects societal changes in peoples' attitudes toward racial integration and growing acceptance of marriage between diverse groups.

A large body of research exists related to societal attitudes toward interracial marriages in the United States that focuses on different levels of acceptance toward the intermingling of races in intimate relationships (Barr, 2001; Chito Childs, 2005). Data have shown that minority group members, young adults, people with a college education, politically liberal individuals, and people living in the West and Northeast geographical areas of the United States view interracial relationships more positively than other populations (Chito Childs, 2005). Furthermore, it has been found that, in general, Blacks and Whites are less accepting of an interracial relationship when a member of the couple is related to them personally (a family member or friend) than when the interracial relationship involves strangers (Barr, 2001). Thus, although overall acceptance of interracial relationships has increased, acceptance varies according to characteristics of the observer.

The function of race in these relationships is complex and often understated. Some people in interracial relationships may say, “I don’t see color,” and although that might be the way they choose to view race in their relationship, research has indicated that partners’ racial identities and attitudes toward race can contribute to the couple’s relationship quality (Forry, Leslie, & Letiecq, 2007). For example, marital satisfaction within interracial couples has been investigated as a function of the partners’ individual racial identities and their views regarding fairness in partner roles within their marriages (Forry, Leslie, & Letiecq, 2007). Findings have shown that partners who are proud of their race and also accepting of other cultures and races had higher levels of marital satisfaction (Leslie & Letiecq, 2004). Studies such as these demonstrate the important role that race plays in intimate relationships between individuals of different races. Also, research in this area suggests that partners’ interactions may be influenced by the social support that they receive from family, friends, and societal institutions (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). Social support is an important relationship factor for all couples; however, the levels of support that mixed-race couples receive from their families and friends may be different from the support received by same-race couples. Interracial couples have reported encountering difficulties between family members and their partners due to racial issues (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). For example, some ethnographic studies have found that some Black-White couples limit their contact with extended family members due to the family’s expressed disapproval (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006). These lived experiences can have significant effects on the quality of interracial couples’ relationships, and therefore the processes of interracial relationships deserve further exploration.

At the same time that America is seeing increased numbers of interracial marriages, research has shown that rates of marital dissolution for interracial couples are significantly higher than for same-race couples (Bratter & King, 2008; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). Research regarding the demographic factors associated with intermarriage rates and divorce rates for interracial families has been conducted and shows that gender and race are associated with those rates (specific results will be discussed further in the literature review). However, the circumstances contributing to higher marital dissolution rates among interracial couples than among same-race couples need to be identified further. There may be a range of factors at play, such as how couples handle conflict, their communication patterns, environmental stressors, etc. These factors are commonly studied in research regarding intimate relations in general (Birditt et al., 2010; Canary & Dainton, 2008), but little is known about their influence on the stability of interracial couples in particular. In other words, the challenges faced by interracial couples are not simply the result of being a particular race. Rather, it is the experiences associated with race that affect the couples. For example, if there is a lower level of family support for the interracial marriage, the result is a lack of social resources for the couple, which in turn may affect their ability to deal with various stressors effectively. In general, research has also shown that the quality of the couple's relationship with their families of origin is positively correlated with the marital satisfaction of the couple (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010). Therefore, the present study investigated whether steps taken to end the relationship vary between same-race and interracial couples. If quantitative differences are found to exist between the two groups, then conflict and areas of conflict, such as

disagreements surrounding relationships with families of origins, are explored as a factor in their decisions about staying in the relationship.

In addition, researchers should pay attention to the stage in the relationship dissolution process at which they assess potential risk factors, and what couples did to avoid ending their relationships. Many couples that are at risk of ending their relationships engage in couple or marital therapy to help resolve some of the relational issues that they have experienced. Because couples often do not seek therapy until they have experienced prolonged distress or a recent marked increase in conflict, examination of a sample of clinic couples affords an opportunity to compare interracial and same-race couples at a point when factors contributing to stress in their relationships are likely to be pronounced. Therefore, in the present study, the use of a clinical sample can help identify areas and degrees of conflict as well as the steps taken toward relationship dissolution in interracial couples' relationships. Comparison with a sample of same-race couples from the same clinic population sheds light on whether the levels of conflict among interracial couples differ from those of same-race couples. If the expected differences are found to exist for these two groups, future exploration can examine the specific areas of conflict that vary between the two groups as identified in prior research, such as societal acceptance, attitudes of family members, and racial identity. Differences in areas of conflict associated with racial composition of the members of the relationship may have implications for mechanisms that could be used to decrease these areas of risk.

Individuals who form intimate relationships with someone from a different culture or race might experience problems with adjusting to aspects of their partner's family system, such as their traditions, communication styles, and expectations regarding

relational roles (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000). During this process of the two individuals adjusting to such differences between them, there is a need for mutual learning and negotiation, in order to foster understanding and acceptance of the differences (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). Mutual adjustment by members of a couple is a crucial process in any intimate relationship, based on the inevitability that two partners will differ in some meaningful ways, and this adjustment can be facilitated by constructive and open communication (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010). However, for interracial couples, constructive communication between partners may be even more important because of external societal factors that can create and increase stress. For example, outside pressure or disapproval from society and family or friends may affect the relationship quality of interracial partners (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). The potential differences that exist between members of interracial couples, based on differences in their cultures and upbringing, make them a unique population to work with in therapy. This study investigated whether there are differences in the amount of conflict experienced by members of interracial couples and same-race couples, as well as the association between level of conflict and the degree of steps that the partners have taken toward leaving the relationships.

As mentioned before, prior research findings suggest that partners often minimize the effects of race in their interracial relationships (Leslie & Letiecq, 2004), so there is a need for further research to determine ways in which racial differences may affect couple relationships, particularly identifying factors that contribute to the documented higher rate of dissolution of the interracial relationships. To the extent that this study uncovers such factors, they will have implications for the couple therapy field. Therapists may

better understand the challenges that couples face when they form interracial relationships, despite the partners' caring and commitment to each other. Values and traditions associated with ethnic backgrounds are likely to influence partners' ways of dealing with many key aspects of life, including child-rearing, shared or different religious practices, and life-style choices, all of which affect the quality of the couple's relationship. Consequently, the degrees to which partners develop effective ways to navigate their differences, such as through the use of constructive communication patterns, may affect the long-term success of their relationships.

Prior research on conflict in couple relationships has indicated that the quality of the communication behavior that partners use to discuss and attempt to resolve issues influences the degree to which conflicts have negative effects on relationship satisfaction and stability (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010; Gottman & Levenson, 2004). Therefore, if interracial couples, as well as same-race couples, engage in constructive communication when in conflict, both groups may experience fewer negative effects from conflicts, and any group difference in relationship satisfaction and steps toward leaving the relationship may be minimized. For couples who have sought therapy for relationship issues, strategies for improving relationship quality can be developed by identifying common areas of conflict as well as communication patterns that can alleviate the negative effects of conflict. Given that interracial couples appear to be at an elevated risk for relationship distress and dissolution, it is important to increase knowledge about factors associated with the racial composition of couples and poorer relationship quality. The present study was designed to investigate the degrees to which interracial and same-race couples may differ in level of relationship conflict, whether those differences

mediate between couple type and risk for relationship distress and dissolution, and whether constructive couple communication can serve as a potential resource for reducing the negative effects.

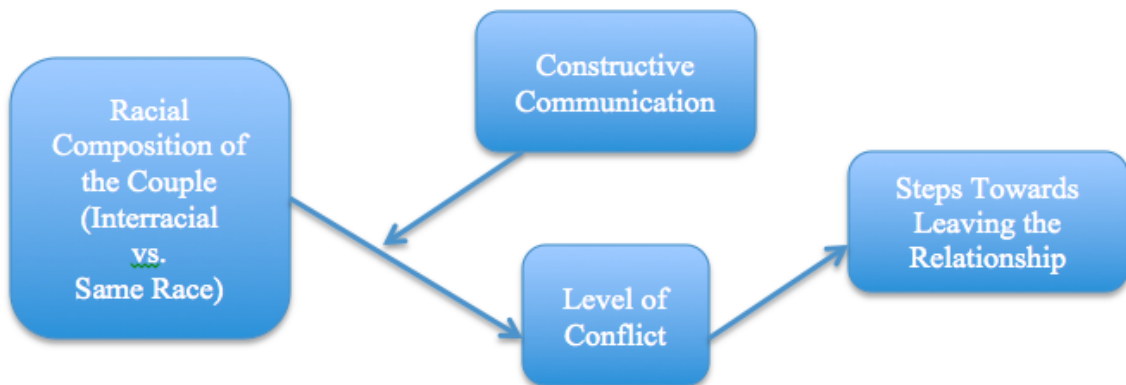
Purpose

Based on gaps in knowledge from prior research, the purposes of this study were to (1) compare the levels of conflict in interracial and same-race couples, (2) explore the degree to which conflict is associated with steps partners have taken to leave their relationship, (3) examine whether the level of conflict accounts for any difference between type of couple (interracial versus same-race) in steps taken toward leaving, and (4) test whether the level of constructive communication between partners when in conflict moderates the association between couple type and level of conflict. This research study explored how interracial and same-race couples who have sought couple therapy for various relationship concerns compare on several factors of relationship experience. Prior research has not identified specific differences in areas of conflict between mixed race and same-race couples; therefore, this aspect of the study was exploratory, examining not only overall level of conflict but also degrees of conflict regarding a variety of areas of relationship functioning. In addition to comparing the levels of conflict regarding these areas of relationship functioning between the two couple types, the study compared the two groups on the degrees to which the partners have taken steps toward leaving the relationship, given that the sample includes couples who sought therapy at a couple and family therapy clinic. Demographic characteristics such as the partners' ages and income would be controlled when comparing interracial and same-race couples if those demographic characteristics were found to be related to

the variables used to test the hypotheses. Finally, the degree to which partners reported engaging in mutual constructive communication during conflicts was tested as a potential moderator, reducing the association between the racial composition of the couple and the level of relationship conflict.

Figure 1

Model of Research Design



Based on prior findings regarding interracial marriages, it seems reasonable to expect higher levels of conflict over core areas of relationship functioning in interracial couples than in same-race couples, which in turn would be associated with more steps taken toward leaving the couple relationship. Constructive forms of problem-solving communication may provide resources that couples, interracial and same-race, can use to alleviate conflicts in their relationships, especially reducing the stresses experienced by interracial couples regarding conflicts associated with relationships with peers and extended family. Therefore, constructive couple communication was tested as a moderator of the association between the racial composition of the couple and the couples' conflict levels.

Due to the smaller population of interracial couples as compared to same-race couples in the U.S. and elsewhere, materials written for clinical use with this group usually are based on case study examples or qualitative research methods with small sample sizes. Fortunately, the present investigator had access to data collected in an outpatient couple and family therapy clinic (described in the Method section) over ten or more years, with a large enough sample size that this investigator was able to conduct a quantitative comparison of individuals in the two types of relationships. Additionally, the nature of the data that have been collected from the couples allows for a group comparison for multiple areas of potential relationship conflict. Similarly, the couples' reports regarding the steps that they have taken toward leaving their relationship can provide a clearer picture of differences in functioning between interracial and same-race couples. Understanding these relationship processes can provide valuable insight into some factors contributing to interracial marriages' higher dissolution rates when compared with same-race marriages. This information may assist in the design of preventive interventions for these at-risk couples.

In addition, this investigation used data collected from a clinical sample, which helps identify the problem areas that interracial couples seeking therapy have been experiencing, in comparison to those experienced by same-race couples, so clinicians can more quickly assess and intervene with those areas of conflict. It was not the goal of this study to generalize about differences that exist between same-race and interracial families, because there likely is great variation within each type of couple, and interracial couples comprised of different combinations of races also face unique challenges. Rather, the aim was to look more closely at possible factors contributing to the higher percentage

of interracial couples dissolving their relationships compared to the percentage of same-race couples who are ending theirs. It was this investigator's hope that findings from the study will prepare therapists to work more effectively with interracial couples.

On a broader level, this research may serve to promote discussion about a traditionally sensitive topic. Increased societal openness to interracial relationships does not necessarily result in more satisfied interracial couples, or in open discussion of the challenges that interracial couples may face. However, identifying potential pitfalls that these couples commonly face, as well as moderating factors such as communication that can influence couples' coping with stressors, can help inform and prepare partners entering interracial relationships to manage the complexities of their relationships and thereby decrease risks for distress and divorce.

From a methodological standpoint, because the data for this study were collected during a time when the couples sought therapy, they are likely to reveal partners' experiences during a period of heightened concern and emotional distress regarding their relationships. Additionally, much of the existing research on interracial marriages has only focused on demographic descriptive characteristics or a limited range of qualitative case studies, while the present study used quantitative self-report assessments to identify potential differences between interracial and same-race couples.

Literature Review

Theoretical Model for the Study: Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is commonly applied to research regarding families and couple relationships. Conflict is defined by Sprey (1975) as "a process of confrontation between individuals, or groups over scarce resources, controversial means, incompatible goals, or

combinations of these” (p. 134). The theory posits that individuals are rooted in their own self-interest and act in accordance with these interests, but at the same time these individuals make up various social organizations such as families, communities, countries, etc. Therefore, individuals must collectively negotiate these interests as a group. Smaller social organizations such as families are a reflection of the larger community and they replicate the conflicts of interests that have existed historically in the society. For example, the conflict that exists between men and women in society is mirrored in the opposition of men and women in monogamous relationships. Even when two people come together with the mutual goal of having children, they are bound to encounter disagreement. On a more macroscopic level, conflict that exists between social groups such as different racial groups can create tension and disagreement over resources (i.e., a disagreement over affirmative action). In relation to this study, it is possible that these tensions over resources can carry over to couple relationships.

This theory asserts that conflict is endemic in social groups both small and large, and it becomes the normal style of interaction. It is the concept of ongoing opposition that has created a broad area of study regarding the *management* of these conflicts in families and couples. Applying these concepts to a couple’s relationship, we find that each partner is acting in his or her best interest (autonomy) while trying to balance the needs of their social group (togetherness). Conflict theory was chosen as the framework for this study because of its focus on the idea that conflict is inherent in relationships. This study measured the level of conflict in these social dyads as well as ways in which couples have negotiated these conflicts.

Conflict theory does not simply focus on the conflict within the group (family interactions) but also between groups (class conflict) (White & Klein, 2008). There is emphasis placed on the allocation of power and resources as a source of conflict motivated by self/group-interest. Individuals are forced to interact to negotiate these resources, and it is these interactions that can lead to conflict. The differing levels of power or access to resources and opportunities in a relationship affect how conflict is managed. This power differential was relevant to this study because power levels in a relationship can be related to racial privilege and societal status based on two partners' races. Power, according to Sprey (1979), is the ability of an individual or group to exercise control over others, and according to this definition power can only be measured by outcomes. By measuring the degrees of conflict that individuals in interracial marriages experience as well as the steps taken toward leaving the relationship, this study explored how race and power might play a part in the couple relationship dynamic. Several types of interracial couples were used in the study. With a large enough sample, it would be of interest to compare different types of minority-minority interracial couples to minority-majority interracial couples on their levels of conflict. This is an attempt to address the question of how power plays a role in conflict and the ability of one partner to have his or her needs met over the other's needs.

Conflict theory not only describes the process from which conflict arises in relationships, but it also provides an explanation of how conflict is resolved and negotiated. According to this theory, conflict management in couple relationships involves partners reaching successful compromises through communication and mediation. Clinical interventions approach conflict from the perspective of improving

negotiation skills and communicating in a style that promotes “fair fighting” (Bach & Wyden, 1968). From this perspective, negotiation is more likely in an egalitarian authority structure, and the outcomes of negotiation are more likely to favor the partner with more resources in the relationship. Therefore, it is important to consider how these resources are discussed between partners during conflict conversations.

Conflict theory serves as the framework for this study in two major capacities. First, the theory has a core concept that conflict is created because individuals act in their own self-interest but have to negotiate those interests with the other members of a social group. When applied to couples, this concept is consistent with empirical evidence that partners engage in different forms of behavior toward each other when they are trying to negotiate their needs. Constructive communication provides an avenue for achieving mutually acceptable solutions to conflict, which allows the relationship to continue and the partners to be satisfied. Poorly managed conflict entails the risk that the partners will become alienated from each other and take steps toward ending the relationship. Second, conflict theory posits that interpersonal conflicts are a reflection of larger societal conflicts. By studying conflict levels and topics of conflict in interracial relationships, this project explores the possibility that societal tensions between different races may play a role in couple relationships. In this study, it was hypothesized that inherent cultural differences in interracial couples create more conflict than is experienced by same-race couples. Therefore, levels of conflict in the two types of couples were measured.

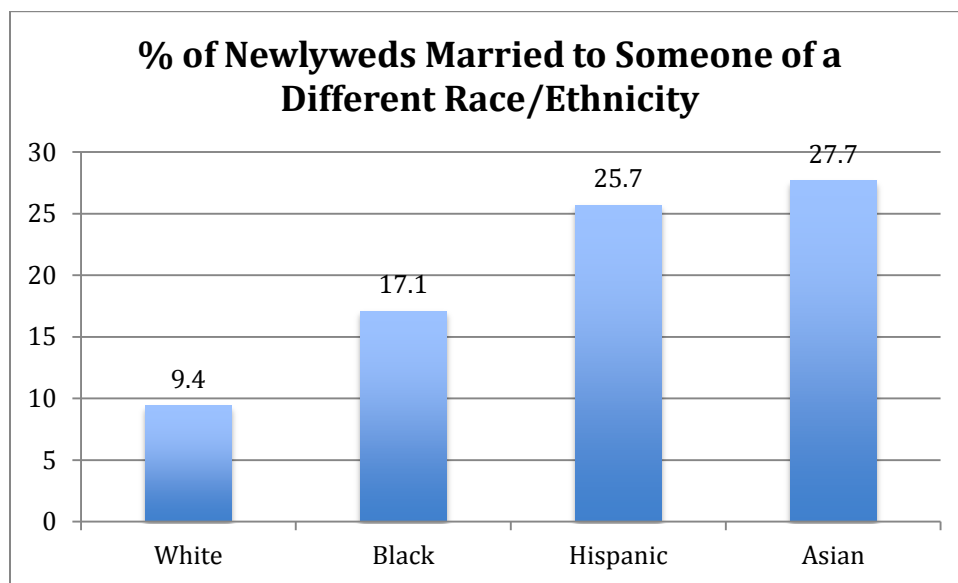
Research on Interracial Marriage and Same-Race Marriage

The first step in understanding interracial marriage in the United States is to look at the societal and demographic trends within the population. Qian and Lichter (2007)

used an analysis of U.S. census data to show that over the past 40 years, since interracial marriage was legalized, the number of intermarriages has significantly increased, thereby reflecting the weakening social boundaries and diminishing intergroup social distance. The authors used an Assimilation Theory perspective when describing the increasing number of interracial marriages in the United States. This theory relates to how different groups create cultural memories and shared experiences in a process of fusion and integration (Lewis & Ford-Robinson, 2010). Intergroup marriage exemplifies the assimilation process in that minority groups have been absorbed into mainstream society, and the increasing number of interracial marriages undermines linguistic, cultural, and residential boundaries among groups. The rising number of immigrants to the United States and the bi-racial children of interracial marriages (as well as the switch from the use of single-race classification in the 1990 census to multiple-race classification in 2000) complicate the statistical interpretation of increased numbers of interracial marriages. Therefore, Qian and Lichter (2007) conducted several analyses of the census data, the results of which show that African Americans are least likely of all minorities to marry Whites, whereas Hispanics have the highest level of intermarriage with Whites, followed closely by Asians. That research provides valuable insight into how interracial marriage represents a blurring of the social boundaries despite the existence of certain differences in rates of intermarriage between different minority groups. Despite the usefulness of demographic data patterns, they do not reveal the complex interactions between the members of these interracial relationships and how partners' interaction patterns may affect interracial couples' assimilation into mainstream American society.

Figure 2

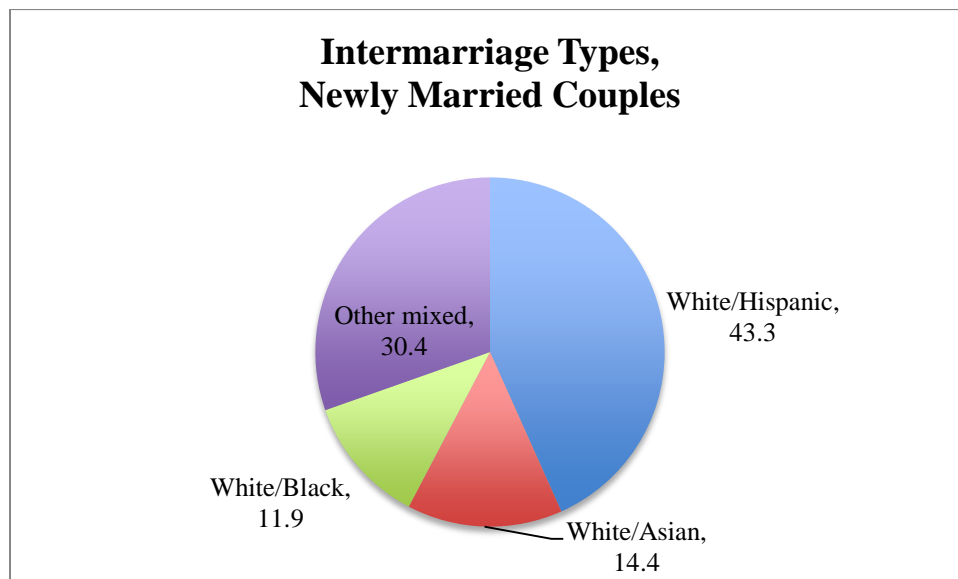
Percent of Interracial Marriages Among First Marriages in the United States



Source: Pew Research Center (2010)

Figure 3

Most Common Types of Intermarriage Among All First Marriages



Source: Pew Research Center (2010)

According to a recent report published by the Pew Research Center (2010) on interracial marriage between the four major racial and ethnic groups in the United States (White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian), Asians and Hispanics have the highest rates of intermarriage. Whites are the largest racial group in the United States, and despite the rate of intermarriage being relatively low among Whites, marriages between this group and other racial groups are still the most common type of interracial relationship. There are also gender differences in interracial marriage for Black and Asian populations but not for White or Hispanic groups. Black males are twice as likely as Black women to marry outside their race. The opposite is true for Asian men and women. In addition, educational attainment is a strong predictor of interracial marriage, with higher education levels being associated with a greater likelihood of being in an interracial marriage (Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006).

Along with the increasing rates of interracial marriage, higher levels of marital dissolution have also been identified for this population when compared with same-race marriages. Zhang and Van Hook (2009) addressed the stability of interracial marriages in a study that found race and ethnicity to be strongly associated with marital dissolution. The authors argued that, consistent with the homogamy perspective, relationships in which partners have more similar characteristics have fewer misunderstandings, less conflict, and greater support from their family and friends. Zhang and Van Hook cite the differences inherent in interracial relationships, in conjunction with pressures and rejection that these couples commonly experience from both racial groups, as factors contributing to interracial relationships being less stable. Their study used demographic data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (Census Bureau, n.d.) to

demonstrate the contribution of racial differences to marriage dissolution; however, the descriptive nature of such results indicating an association between interracial marriage and higher risk of divorce does not bring us any closer to understanding *how* racial differences between partners influence these intimate relationships.

Within the small body of research that has compared interracial and same-race couples, one study specifically compared rates of divorce for the two groups and found that there were trends based on the particular racial composition of the couple; for example, whether the male or female in the relationship was Black, White, Asian, or Hispanic (Bratter & King, 2008). Using data from the National Survey of Family Growth, Bratter and King (2008) examined whether higher risk of divorce occurred across all types of interracial relationships. The results showed that, overall, interracial couples have higher rates of divorce than same-race couples. In addition, when compared with White-White couples, White female-Black male, and White female-Asian male couples were more prone to divorce. Couples comprised of non-White females, White males, and Hispanics had similar or lower risks for divorce when compared to White-White couples. The differences in divorce rates for mixed-race couples based on the gender and racial composition of the couple are important to consider for the purposes of the present study. However, the sample size for the present study was considerably smaller than the National Survey of Family Growth, and therefore only one comparison within the sample of interracial couples was conducted (White/non-White couples versus non-White/non-White couples).

The higher rate of relationship dissolution for interracial relationships is cause for concern, but even more alarming are the differences between same-race couples and

interracial couples on measures of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). One study (Fusco, 2010) examined police reports of IPV over the course of a year in one U.S. county and found that interracial couples had significantly higher rates of arrest when compared to White-White couples and ethnic minority monoracial couples. In addition, mutual assault (both partners engaging in physical violence) was 1.5 times higher in interracial couples than ethnic minority monoracial couples, and twice as likely in White couples. The author postulates that interracial couples may be under greater stress from their environment than same-race couples, which in turn puts them at greater risk for experiencing IPV (Fusco, 2010). These couples face the same racial discrimination as ethnic minority monoracial couples, but they may have less social support to help buffer the negative effects. This research brings to light the extent to which being of a different race than one's partner can result in extreme conflict and negative relationship behaviors. Further research is needed to effectively address what problems are associated with this population and how interventions can be geared toward the prevention of IPV in interracial couples.

Bratter and King's (2008) study highlighted the different *problems* that interracial couples face in general based on their gender or race. However, the study did not provide potential *explanations* for the race and gender differences, and the researchers acknowledged that their data did not provide information about influences on the couple from anyone beyond the dyad (e.g., extended family, friends, and community were not included). In their discussion, Bratter and King did propose two potential explanations for these differences. The first is that the degree of social distance between the groups may be an important factor in the relationship duration. For example, Whites remain the least

likely to marry Blacks, and Blacks have the lowest rate of intermarriage. Black men and White women have the highest level of marital disruption, which may point to the continuation of historical prohibitive norms against Black men crossing the Black/White divide (Moran, 2001). Their second untested hypothesis regarding the differences in interracial couples' divorce rates relates to the negative reactions of strangers and diminished support from family and friends. Their findings suggest this may be even more common for White female/non-White male couples, due to a perception that White females are a threat to Black women's marital opportunities (Chito Childs, 2005), as well as the perception that White mothers lack the experience or qualifications to raise minority children (Twine, 1999). This gender-race distinction deserves further investigation.

Porterfield (1982) also addressed homogamy (same-race marriage) versus heterogamy (interracial marriage) in modern society and explained how there exists a common belief that "strong norms against racial intermarriage should be accompanied by beliefs that such marriages are fraught with special hazards and are likely to fail" (p. 25). In order to explore interracial couples' experiences with racism, Killian (2003) conducted in-depth interviews with 12 Black-White couples. The qualitative data were full of examples of incidents of public racism toward the couples, to which couples responded by "staring back", disassociating from their partner, restricting the places that they would visit together, and not discussing public reactions to their relationship at home. Killian also noted that several couples that were interviewed downplayed the role of race in their relationship and focused on similarities between partners. Additionally, some couples stated that they incorporated very few of their ethnic rituals, traditions, and foods into

their new lives together, choosing to leave their culture of origin behind and trying to be “normal” in an effort to avoid being seen as “strange” by their extended family. This research demonstrates the dual consciousness that some interracial couples have about race; Killian states that, “couples see themselves one way, and they see the society perceiving them in another” (p. 19). The attitudes expressed in the study regarding racial consciousness are relevant for the present study because they point to schemas that members of interracial couples may have about themselves, and they also identify ways in which interracial couples are affected by society’s attitudes toward them. However, Killian’s study did not examine how the partners’ races influenced their interactions with each other, the degree to which the racial composition of their relationship was associated with conflict in particular areas of the relationship, how they communicate about areas of conflict, nor the connection between the couple’s conflicts and the partners’ marital satisfaction levels.

Another study (Karis, 2003) addressed the same phenomenon of interracial partners minimizing the importance of race in their relationships, but identified that each partner’s own race plays a part in the way the individuals perceive and talk about race in the couple relationship. By interviewing 17 White women who were or had been married to Black men, Karis (2003) was able to identify some of the ways in which the White partners were able to recognize their positions of privilege in entering interracial marriages. Participants also described differences in how they experienced race depending on whether they were operating in a larger societal setting or within their family, reinforcing the idea that racial attitudes are socially constructed. One participant stated that, “Race disappears in this house”; however, although participants denied that

stereotypes about interracial couples affected them, there were numerous examples described about ways in which stereotypes influenced their sense of self and their behavior toward their partners. Some White women deliberately avoided behaviors that would reinforce stereotypes. For example, one woman did not want people to assume that her non-White partner was using her for her financial resources and therefore avoided conversations regarding the couple's income. Another wanted to devalue the stereotype that Black men have many girlfriends, so she would avoid giving the impression that she would put up with any infidelity by her Black husband. Other women described finding freedom in breaking cultural rules about color boundaries; e.g., "There is freedom in marrying a Black man. And I think that freedom is to be yourself. I did not have to live the way my folks did, but I was choosing something new" (p. 33). Karis (2003) also raised the question of how race is constructed during couples' interactions with extended families, and found that lack of acceptance on the part of family members toward interracial couples can make the role of race more salient in the couple's own interactions. Karis' study demonstrated how race is socially constructed and can take on different meanings based on the environment in which one is interacting. The findings indicated the importance of conducting further research to identify more concrete links between the racial compositions of couple relationships and the quality of those relationships.

Although most of the research on interracial couples has focused on the challenges that partners face as a result of societal stereotypes and lack of family acceptance, some research refutes the idea that interracial relationships are more conflict-filled than intraracial relationships (Troy, Lewis-Smith, & Laurenceau, 2006). Indeed,

one study compared the two types of romantic relationships in a sample of college students, using couples' scores on the Relationship Satisfaction Scale (Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994) and found that individuals in interracial relationships (male partners $M = 4.91$, female partners $M = 4.97$) actually had significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction than individuals in intraracial relationships (male partners $M = 4.44$, female participants $M = 4.63$). Additionally, the researchers found no difference in styles of conflict and in attachment styles for the two groups. Their results were only partially replicated in a second study that measured relationship quality using the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Scale (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) within another sample of college students at the same university, in which no significant differences were found between interracial couples and intraracial couples on level of relationship quality, conflict patterns, and attachment styles (Troy, Lewis-Smith, & Laurenceau, 2006).

The Troy et al. (2006) study provides further evidence that interracial relationships are deserving of more analysis and study. It may be the case that partners who are better able to navigate the challenges of an interracial relationship may have higher levels of relationship satisfaction than couples of the same race, whereas those interracial couples who struggle with conflicts associated with relationships with family members or friends may be more willing to leave the relationship. The processes with which couples deal with conflict and differences in their relationships need to be better understood, and the present study was designed to investigate such processes.

One study did examine the degrees to which partners' racial identities, social support, and experiences of discrimination predicted marital quality of interracial couples

(Leslie & Letiecq, 2004). The researchers separated variables into categories of microcontexts (i.e., children, life stressors, and life transitions) and macrocontexts (i.e., social conditions and institutions), focusing on microcontexts such as racial identity, social support, and experiences with discrimination that could potentially influence relationship quality. In Leslie and Letiecq's (2004) study, racial identity was defined as "the extent to which individuals are aware of, understand, and value their racial background" (p. 560) and was measured with the Racial Identity Attitude Scales (Helms & Carter, 1991). Survey results from Black-White couples in the Washington, D.C. area showed that, especially for Black participants, higher levels of racial identity were correlated with higher levels of marital satisfaction. Additionally, social support and experiences with discrimination were not strongly associated with marital quality. These results contradict previous claims by partners in interracial marriages that race does not play a part in their relationships.

Another study looked at social perceptions of interracial relationships and partner behaviors related to public demonstrations of commitment and affection. Wang (2006) looked at the stability of interracial romantic relationships in adolescents aged 14-17. The results showed that in comparison to intraracial relationships, individuals engaged in interracial relationships were more likely to keep the relationship to themselves, less likely to display commitment to their relationship in public, less willing to talk to their family members about the relationship, and less likely to meet the partner's parents. In this sample, interracial couples had shorter relationship lengths as well as higher levels of relationship dissolution. Although this is a unique sample due to the age of the individuals engaged in the relationships, it does reflect some of the patterns that exist in

adults that enter interracial relationship. From these results, it can be concluded that interracial couples are more likely to hide their relationship from family and friends out of a fear of rejection.

A major weakness in previous research on interracial couples has been the lack of consistency with research methods. The most commonly researched population of interracial relationships is Black-White couples, but some other studies examine all combinations of interracial relationships. More refined information is needed regarding the processes involved in intimate relationships between people of different races, in order to better prepare couples to cope effectively with the stressors that they are likely to face, and to help them develop adequate strategies for resolving conflict.

Conflict and Steps Towards Leaving the Relationship

Research on couples who are “at-risk” for divorce has been ongoing since the national divorce rate rose sharply in the 1960s and 1970s. This research has show that there are a number of factors that can predict couples’ marital dissolution outcomes, such as the presence of violence in the current relationship, violence and divorce in the partners’ families of origin, and negative interactions in the current relationship (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2005; Birditt et al., 2010; Gottman et al., 1976; Markman, 1981). Patterns of negative interactions – which are defined as negative affect, denial, withdrawal, conflict, and dominance – have been found to discriminate between distressed and nondistressed couples (Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). An early study by Locke and Wallace (1959) comparing distressed and nondistressed married couples distinguished these two groups by looking at their degree of marital adjustment and desire for behavior change for self or spouse. Distressed couples were

determined to be “maladjusted” by their scores of over 105 on the DAS as well as having expressed an extreme desire for significant change in a particular behavior.

There is a strong association between the characteristics of couples’ communication and their degree of relationship satisfaction. Karney and Bradbury (1995) did a review of the literature regarding marital quality and stability over time. They found that a large proportion of the research focused on social learning and behaviors that the partners engage in that affect their relationship. Specifically, behaviors used during problem-solving discussions have become a focal area of couple communication research. Findings have shown that partners’ overall evaluations of their relationship are positively influenced by rewarding/positive behaviors and adversely affected by punishing/negative behaviors. This shows that when couples encounter conflict and are able to engage in constructive communication during the problem solving stage, their judgments of relationship quality can be influenced.

Along those lines, couple conflict has been identified as a major source of relationship distress. If disagreements are not handled well, negative emotions can start to build up on both sides, which in turn can lead to destructive couple interactions and decreases in relationship satisfaction (Markman, 1991). Similarly, Gottman (1994) published the results of his observational studies in which specific couple communication patterns were identified as harmful to couples’ marital stability. The patterns that Gottman identified have now been dubbed “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” because they are such strong predictors of marital dissolution. These patterns are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (withdrawing), and all four are detrimental to efforts to resolve conflicts or disagreements.

Findings from Couple Communication Research Regarding Conflict Resolution

Positive patterns of communication have been identified as a potential moderating factor, reducing negative effects of conflict on relationship quality for both same-race and interracial couples. This prediction is based on research regarding intergroup conflict that has demonstrated a need for open dialogue between partners concerning their relationship. Research on couple communication has examined universal patterns, and there is little research comparing interracial and intraracial couples on their communication styles.

There is one model of interracial relationship communication that was found to be a useful framework for understanding the development of interracial romantic relationships and the important role that communication plays at each stage. Although it does not directly address the connection between conflict and communication, this model provides a good background for understanding interracial relationships and communication regarding racial identity. Foeman and Nance (1999) developed a four-stage framework that outlines the negotiation and evolution of interracial family development. The stages include (1) racial awareness, (2) coping, (3) identity emergence, and (4) maintenance. Racial awareness occurs as two individuals get to know each other and become familiar with the similarities and differences between them. For same-race couples, this may be a more subtle process of learning individual patterns and voicing goals and opinions. However, couples that do not share similar group membership have more of a challenging process of learning the other person's religious, socioeconomic, and political cultures. Interracial couples in this stage learn about four different sets of perspectives: (1) their own, (2) their partner's, (3) their collective racial group's, and (4)

their partner's racial group's. In this stage, it is important that the couple communicates with each other and articulates a common perspective on the role of race in their initial attraction. The second stage, coping with social definitions of race, involves the social implications of a deepening interracial romantic relationship. The couple learns how to respond to comments from family, friends, and outsiders about their relationship. They may avoid racially hot issues in public, ignore people who insist their problems are due to race, or learn to turn to those who will support them. Communication in this stage has the function of building strategies to cope with the social reactions surrounding their interracial relationship. In the third stage, identity emergence, couples develop positive behaviors that are sustainable and focus on strengths of the relationship rather than individual differences. Communication can give voice to the way that individuals, couples, or families view themselves. They take pride in existing on their own terms and the fact that they are the product of a multicultural society. The last stage, maintenance, is ongoing as the couple evolves and possibly cycles through the other stages. Some of the issues that couples discuss early in the relationship may need to be readdressed and evaluated when the couple has children, for example.

This model identifies positive interaction patterns in each of the stages of relationship development for interracial romantic relationships. Foeman and Nance (2002) reported a follow up study in which they interviewed Black-White interracial couples regarding their experiences of the stages outlined by the Foeman and Nance (1999) model of interracial romantic relationships. These interviews were focused on the positive impact of communication at each stage of the relationship and provided many

examples of how Black-White couples used language to learn about each other and how best to interact as a interracial couple in American society.

For more detailed information about communication as a means of conflict resolution, it is necessary to look toward the broader field of couple communication research. There is limited distinction in this field regarding aspects of communication that address the racial composition of the couple, but the research has shown to be generalizable to various cultural and racial groups. Mutual constructive communication has been identified as a pattern of communication that is associated with greater marital satisfaction and lower distress in several populations, such as couples dealing with cancer (Milbury & Badr, 2013), remarriage (Mirecki, Brimhall, & Bramesfeld, 2013), and sexual dysfunction (Badr & Taylor, 2009). When compared with other communication patterns such as demand-withdraw, mutual constructive communication helps partners openly discuss concerns regarding their relationship. This positive influence of constructive communication on relationships has been shown to hold true for European populations as well as subjects in the United States (Bodenmann, Kaiser, Hahlweg, & Fehm-Wolfsdorf, 1998). In a study conducted with Swiss and German couples, the validity and reliability of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ) was tested, and researchers found that communication avoidance and withdrawal were negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction. The same study revealed that higher scores on mutual constructive communication were positively correlated with tenderness in couple relationships (Bodenmann, Kaiser, Hahlweg, & Fehm-Wolfsdorf, 1998).

The present study used a cumulative score on a self-report measure of mutual constructive communication (the CPQ) as a possible moderator of the relationship

between couple conflict and the risk of partners leaving the relationship (which is equivalent to the risk for divorce explored in other studies). The way couples communicate has been linked continuously to relationship outcomes, and therefore building constructive positive communication skills has been a focus of couple therapy and the prevailing models of interventions (Baucom et al., 2008; Benson, McGinn, & Christensen, 2012; Epstein & Baucom, 2002).

Variables in the Present Study

Racial composition of the couple is the independent variable in this study and is defined by the self-identified races of the two individual partners. An interracial couple is composed of one of 14 racial combinations (those combinations are described in the sample section of this proposal), and a same-race couple is comprised of two individuals who self-identified as being the same race. The dependent variable for this study is the *degrees to which members of a couple have taken steps toward leaving their relationship*. Steps toward leaving the relationship is an index of the couple's risk for separation and divorce, based on how much each partner has thought about, or taken behavioral steps toward the dissolution of the relationship. A variable that was examined as potentially mediating between racial composition of the couple and steps taken toward leaving was the *level of conflict experienced by the couple* regarding a variety of areas of functioning within their relationship (e.g., finances, affection, relationships with in-laws).

Furthermore, prior research has shown that positive forms of communication during conflict can reduce the negative effects of the conflict on the quality of the couple's relationship (Gottman & Levenson, 2004). In this study the degree of mutual constructive communication that the partners engage in was examined as a possible

moderator of the association between relationship conflict level and steps taken to leave the relationship among same-race and interracial couples.

Hypotheses

Based on theory and existing literature on characteristics and experiences of interracial couples, it was hypothesized that:

- (1) The level of overall conflict will be higher for individuals in interracial relationships than for individuals in same-race relationships. As an exploratory aspect of the study, specific areas of conflict that differentiate individuals interracial and same-race relationships will be examined. Lower conflict reported by individuals in same-race relationships would be congruent with the homogamy perspective.
- (2) Individuals in interracial relationships will report taking greater steps toward leaving their relationships than individuals in same-race relationships will report.
- (3) The difference in steps taken to leave the relationship by individuals in interracial relationships and individuals in same-race relationships will be mediated by the level of overall conflict that the individual experiences in areas of their relationship.
- (4) The individual's degree of mutual constructive communication behavior will moderate the association between the couple type and the degree of relationship conflict.

In addition to these research questions, possible gender differences were explored for conflict, steps toward leaving the relationship, and mutual constructive communication. Male and female participants' scores both were included in the analyses for the two types

of couple relationships, due to previous literature that has indicated gender differences on those variables.

METHOD

Sample

All of the individuals whose data were used in this study sought therapy at the Center for Healthy Families (CHF) at the University of Maryland, College Park for various relationship issues. They completed extensive pre-therapy assessments, involving questionnaires and interviews. The client population at the CHF is diverse in terms of age, race, ethnicity, education, socio-economic status, and types of presenting problems. For the purposes of this study, interracial couples were broadly defined as those including partners of different races. Interracial couples could potentially be comprised of one White partner and another non-White partner, or two non-White partners of different races. Same-race couples were those comprised of two members who self-identify as being of the same race (White-White, African American-African American, Asian-Asian, and Latino-Latina). The race of the participant was determined by his or her response to a multiple-choice question completed as part of the pre-therapy intake procedure at CHF. On a demographic questionnaire, participants self-identify their race by choosing from six categories: African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American, White, and Other. Participants choose their own race from these seven categories; people who selected "Other" were not required to give details as to their racial composition. Of the 654 couples from whom data were collected at the CHF since the year 2000, there were 111 couples that were identified as interracial. However, out of these 111 couples, 36 couples had one partner who identified his or her race as "other," with no

specification. After looking more carefully at the case information for couples with one member who identified as “other”, the race of 26 participants could be identified, and some of those individuals chose more than one race. The couples in which one partner identified himself or herself as biracial were not included in the study (9 couples) due to a lack of clarity as to which race the individual most identified with. Ten couples had one partner for whom race could not be identified, and these couples were not included in the present study. The remaining number of interracial couples was 92. Table 1 summarizes the racial composition of the couples in the sample.

Table 1

Racial Breakdown of Interracial Couple Participants

Race of Partner 1	Race of Partner 2	Number of couples
African American	Asian	3
African American	Hispanic	16
African American	Native American	3
African American	White	25
Asian	Hispanic	7
Asian	Native American	1
Asian	White	9
Hispanic	White	27
White	Native American	1

The CHF is a non-profit clinic that offers therapy services to couples and families who live in communities surrounding the University of Maryland, College Park campus. Therapists working at the CHF are graduate students in training within the nationally accredited Couple and Family Therapy master’s degree program, who are supervised by clinically licensed faculty members. In addition to being a site for research and clinical training, the CHF also offers low-cost services to over 500 families each year. Because too few same-sex couples seek services at the CHF to permit statistical comparisons of

same-sex versus heterosexual couples, the sample for this study was comprised of heterosexual couples who are living together (married or not married).

Measures

Participants' responses to a demographic information survey, the Relationship Issues Survey (RIS; Epstein, 1999), a revised version of the Marital Status Inventory (MSI; Weiss & Cerreto, 1980), and the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) were used to operationalize the variables in this study. Male and female partners have separate scores for each of the measures and therefore the gender was used as a variable in the analyses for this study.

Demographic Characteristics

As part of the intake assessment procedure at the Center for Healthy Families, clients are required to complete demographic information questionnaires. On the questionnaire, the client reports his or her relationship status, occupation, gross yearly income, level of education, country of origin, parent's country of origin, race, religious preference, and household size. The basic descriptive information about participants in the sample was collected using this instrument.

Couple Relationship Conflict

In order to measure the degree of conflict that each partner experiences in a variety of areas of their relationship, this investigator used the *Relationship Issues Survey* (RIS; Epstein, 1999), an instrument created at the Center for Healthy Families for the purpose of assessing degrees of conflict that partners experience in various areas of their couple relationships. The RIS is comprised of 28 topics or areas in which a couple might experience conflict, which participants rate as 0 = Not at all a source of disagreement or

conflict, 1 = Slightly a source of disagreement or conflict, 2 = Moderately a source of disagreement or conflict, or 3 = Very much a source of disagreement or conflict. The range of scores is 0-84; there are no overall cutoff scores that indicate low levels of conflict, medium levels of conflict, and high levels of conflict, because this scale simply measures conflict in various areas of the relationship. The topics range from relationships with friends, to personal habits, to the sexual relationship, to expressions of caring and emotion. The Cronbach alpha for the total RIS score was .90 in the current sample. A copy of the RIS can be found in Appendix A.

In a recent study, Lowe (2011) ran a factor analysis of the RIS and reduced the 28 areas of conflict to four dimensions: basic life values and priorities, closeness and commitment in the relationship, emotional connectivity and expressiveness, and consideration for one's partner. Since this factor analysis was run in 2011, a significant amount of additional couple data has been collected at the Center for Healthy Families. Additionally, the sets of items comprising the four dimensions of conflict from Lowe's study were identified based on statistical criteria of factor loadings, but conceptually the items in each factor appear to have fairly diverse content. Therefore, the first step in the present study's data analysis was to re-run the factor analysis of these 28 variables to attempt to identify more clear dimensions of relationship conflict. This was done as an area of exploration to see if there are differences between same-race couples and interracial couples regarding what types of topics were associated with higher levels of conflict.

First a principal components analysis was conducted that had an unrestricted number of factors extracted. Based on the Eigenvalues of the factor analysis and their

Scree Plot, it was determined that there were six meaningful factors (with Eigenvalues greater than one). In examining the factor structure matrix, the factor loadings identified subsets of the RIS items that clustered together. As an additional check on the feasibility of these sets of items serving as internally consistent RIS subscales for this study, Cronbach alpha scores were computed for them. Table 2 presents the six factors and their conceptual labels, along with the items that loaded on them, their factor loadings, and the Cronbach alphas. For the full factor loading structure matrix, please see Appendix 2.

Table 2

Factors Extracted from the RIS with Item Factor Loadings and Subscale Cronbach Alphas

Subscale Title (Cronbach Alpha)	Items (factor loading)
Communication and Cohesiveness (.76)	Child rearing/parenting approaches (.486) Understanding of each other's stresses or problems (.625) How negative thoughts and emotions are communicated (.674) How positive thoughts and emotions are communicated (.615) Expressions of caring and affection (.528) How decisions are made (.543)
Trust (.84)	Amount of commitment to the relationship (-.628) Affairs (-.762) Privacy (-.703) Honesty (-.853) Trustworthiness (-.850)
Personal Habits/Preferences (.78)	Personal habits (.626) Personal manners (.608) Household tasks and management (.651) Taking care of possessions (.645) Personal standard for neatness (.814) Personal grooming (.701)
Life Goals (.64)	Career and job issues (.745) Religion or personal philosophy of life (.546) Finances (.648) Goals and things believed important in life (.761)
Time Management (.68)	Daily life schedules and routines (-.714) Leisure activities and interests (-.749) Amount of time spent together (-.693)
Other Significant Relationships (.375)	Relationship with friends (.504) Relationship with family of origin (.489)

Since the alpha was low for the sixth factor, this investigator examined findings for the two items (relationship with friends and relationship with family of origin) from that factor separately. The RIS items “drugs and alcohol” and “sexual relationship” had low loadings on all of the factors, so they were not included in any of the subscales.

Steps Taken toward Leaving the Relationship

The Marital Status Inventory - Revised (MSI-R; Epstein & Werlinich, 1999) measures the degree to which individuals have thought about or taken steps toward ending the couple relationship. The original MSI was developed by Weiss and Cerreto (1980) in order to measure perceived divorce potential. The MSI was altered at the Center for Healthy Families at the University of Maryland to be more applicable to couples that are not legally married, and so items on the MSI-R are not restricted to legal marriage and divorce. The MSI-R asks participants to answer “yes” or “no” to 18 closed-ended questions about the status of their relationship, such as whether they “discussed plans for moving out with friends or relatives”, “consulted an attorney about legal separation, a stay away order, or divorce”, or “discussed separation (or divorce) with your partner” in the past four months. The scores range from 0-18, with higher scores indicating more steps being taken toward leaving the relationship. Several studies have examined the reliability and validity of the MSI. The Spearman-Brown split-half reliability for the MSI for couples in six clinical sites and one marital enrichment sample was shown to be .87 (Crane, Newfield, & Armstrong, 1984). In addition, Weiss and Cerreto (1980) computed the correlation between scores on the MSI and those on the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test, to determine the discriminant validity of the MSI. Results suggested that marital satisfaction and divorce potential (steps taken to

leave the relationship) are related but sufficiently distinct constructs. Whiting and Crane (2003) also investigated the association between the MSI and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test. The MSI was shown to differentiate between severely distressed couples who are close to divorce and moderately distressed and non-distressed couples.

Positive Couple Communication

The Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) is a tool used to measure communication between intimate partners on a dyadic level. It is a useful communication assessment tool because it addresses the behavior patterns of both members of the couple. The CPQ has three subscales: 1) mutual constructive communication, 2) mutual avoidance of communication, and 3) demand/withdrawal (which has separate scores for male demand/female withdraw and female demand/male withdraw). The present study focused only on the mutual constructive communication of the couple, which assesses the mutual discussion of problems, expressing feelings, understanding of viewpoints, negotiation of solutions, and resolution of problems. It was hypothesized that mutual constructive communication would serve as a moderator variable, buffering the association between being a member of an interracial couple and experiencing more relationship conflict. Each individual's mutual constructive communication total score was computed by adding the person's responses to the five items comprising that subscale. These questions describe the likelihood of constructive communication behaviors occurring during and after a couple's discussion of a problem in their relationship. Table 3 lists the five questions that comprise this subscale.

Table 3

CPQ Mutual Constructive Communication Subscale Items

1. Both members try to discuss the problem.
2. Both members express their feelings to each other.
3. Both members suggest possible solutions and compromises.
4. Both feel each other has understood the other's position.
5. Both feel that the problem has been solved.

The total CPQ is comprised of 35 items that are rated on a 9-point Likert scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 9 (very likely). The range of possible scores is 0-45 for the five questions that make up the mutual constructive communication subscale. Previous research has shown that the CPQ has good reliability and validity for the different subscales, with Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficients ranging from .62 to .84, and an average of .71 (Christensen & Heavey, 1990, Christensen & Shenk, 1991). In particular, the subscale on mutual constructive communication has been shown to have high internal consistency and moderately high agreement between partners (Heavey et al., 1996).

Table 4

Variable Properties

Variables	Measures	# of items	Range of scores	Meaning of scores
Race	Couple Information (Question #14)	1	1 = Native American 2 = African American 3 = Asian/Pacific Islander 4 = Hispanic 5 = White 6=Other (specify)	
Level of Conflict	RIS	28	0-84	Higher=more
Steps to Leave Relationship	MSI-R	18	0-18	Higher=more
Mutual Constructive Communication	CPQ	5	0-45	Higher=more

Note: RIS = Relationship Issues Survey; MSI-R = Marital Status Inventory-Revised; CPQ = Communication Patterns Questionnaire.

Procedure

In order to examine marital conflict and steps taken toward leaving the relationship in same-race and interracial couples, this researcher analyzed data that have been gathered at the Center for Healthy Families as part of the standard intake process for all new clients at the clinic was analyzed. Data for this study had been collected over the course of 13 years, so this specific study only involves secondary analysis of the data, not active data collection.

Couple assessments are completed on the clients' first and second appointments at the clinic. Graduate student therapist interns are charged with coordinating the assessment procedures for the couple. On the first day, after signing consent forms, interns conduct separate interviews with each partner regarding violence and substance abuse in the relationship. After the interview, each partner independently fills out a packet of self-report inventories, including a demographic information survey, the RIS,

the MSI-R, and the CPQ. On the second day of the assessment, couples continue with the paper and pencil tests, and they also complete a ten-minute communication sample, in which they discuss a topic from the RIS that they have identified as a source of moderate conflict in their relationship. Their discussion is video-recorded and subsequently coded for verbal content and nonverbal behavior by teams of undergraduate students who receive extensive training. In total, the Center for Healthy Families has collected data from 974 couples since the set of assessments was instituted in 2000, and out of that population 92 couples (184 individuals) were identified as being interracial.

Thus, the only procedure that was used in the present study is extraction from the CHF assessment database of the relevant scores on the measures used to test the study's hypotheses. There was no contact with subjects.

RESULTS

Sample Descriptive Statistics

The secondary analyses used to test this study's hypotheses were based on a sample of 564 couples. The sample came from a clinical population of heterosexual couples who sought therapy at the Center for Healthy Families at the University of Maryland, College Park. Descriptive statistical analyses for the entire sample showed that it is fairly diverse across multiple variables. Participants' ages ranged from 14-77 for females (mean = 32.07) and 17-82 for males (mean = 33.80). The mean length of the couples' current relationship was 7.01 years as reported by the females ($SD = 7.05$) and 6.82 years as reported by the males ($SD = 7.04$). The mean number of children living in the household was 1.22 as reported by the females and 1.09 as reported by the males. This sample was shown to have a diverse racial composition; Table 5 summarizes the

racial breakdown of the sample by couple type and gender. The sample had a wide variety of educational backgrounds, and the distribution of their educational levels is summarized in Table 6.

The sample's descriptive statistics were also computed for female and male participants separately for relationship type (same-race versus interracial), the results of which can be seen in Table 7. The mean age for females in interracial relationships was 30.54, and females in same-race relationships had a mean age of 32.40 years. This difference was not statistically significant; $t(545) = 1.833, p = .067$. The mean age for males in interracial relationship was 31.60 years and 34.27 years for males in same-race relationships. Even though the mean age for males in interracial relationships was found to be statistically lower than males in same-race relationships, $t(539) = 2.42, p = .016$, age was not correlated with any of the dependent variables. Male age and total conflict on the RIS were not significantly correlated, $r(406) = .084, p = .090$, and male age and steps taken to leave the relationship were not significantly correlated; $r(471) = -.074, p = .110$. This shows that even though there is an age difference between males in interracial relationship or same-race relationships, age does not influence any of the main effects tested in this study. Mean yearly gross income for the female partners in interracial relationships was \$27,446 as compared to \$27,658 for females in same-race relationships. This difference was not found to be statistically different; $t(497) = .075, p = .940$. Similarly, there was no statistical difference between the mean yearly gross income of males in interracial relationships (\$37,088) when compared to male partners in same-race relationships (\$38,492); $t(539) = .382, p = .702$.

Previous literature has pointed to marital status as an factor influencing steps that individuals have taken toward leaving a relationship, with members of married couples being less likely to take steps to leave than members of unmarried couples (Brines & Joyner, 1999). This could be due to the time and cost required for divorce, which may lead some married couples to reconsider divorce and work harder to resolve their problems (Previti & Amato, 2003). To explore if relationship status was a confounding variable with steps towards leaving the relationship in the present study, a Chi-square analysis was run to compare differences in marital status for individuals in the two types of relationships. 56.1% of the female participants in same race relationships were married and 62.9% of female participants in interracial relationships were married. This difference was not found to be statistically significant; $\chi^2 = 1.51$, $df = 1$, $p = .220$. Similarly, there was no statistical difference found for marital status among male participants. 54.8% of male partners in same-race relationships were married and 61.6% of male partners in interracial relationship were married; $\chi^2 = 1.42$, $df = 1$, $p = .234$.

Table 5

Racial Composition of Sample by Couple Type and Gender

	Same Race				Interracial			
	Female (n = 446)		Male (n = 444)		Female (n=96)		Male (n = 95)	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Native American	1	.2	0	0	0	0	6	6.1
African American	225	48.3	216	46.6	23	23.5	25	25.5
Asian/ Pacific Islander	3	.6	4	.9	11	11.2	9	9.2
Hispanic	29	6.2	29	6.3	29	29.6	14	14.3
White	171	36.7	169	36.4	28	28.6	33	33.7
Other	17	3.6	24	5.2	5	5.1	7	7.1

Table 6

Education Levels by Couple Type and Gender

	Same Race		Different Race	
	Female (n = 447)	Male (n = 445)	Female (n = 97)	Male (n = 96)
Some high school	3.9%	6.9%	5.1%	4.1%
High school	9.2%	14.7%	11.2%	21.4%
Some college	22.3%	25.0%	30.6%	25.5%
Trade school	8.8%	9.3%	5.1%	5.1%
Associate's degree	13.1%	9.3%	11.2%	11.2%
Bachelor's degree	14.4%	10.1%	11.2%	11.2%
Some graduate education	13.5%	7.5%	10.2%	9.2%
Master's degree	7.3%	6.9%	7.1%	6.1%
Doctoral degree	3.4%	6.0%	7.1%	4.1%

Table 7

Means for Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Same Race		Different Race	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Age	32.40 (SD = 9.30)	34.27 (SD=10.00)	30.54 (SD = 7.83)	31.60 (SD = 7.63)
Range	14 – 77	17 – 82	18 – 53	19-63
% Married	56.1%	54.8%	62.9%	61.5%
Years Together	7.07 (SD = 7.37)	7.03 (SD = 7.45)	6.75 (SD = 5.44)	5.80 (SD = 4.83)
Gross Individual Income	\$27,658 (SD = 23,811)	\$38,492 (SD = 31,751)	\$27,446 (SD = 25,074)	\$37,088 (SD = 26,852)
# of Children	1.19 (SD = 1.26)	1.07 (SD = 1.23)	1.37 (SD = 1.40)	1.14 (SD = 1.31)

Overview of Main Analyses

First, 2 X 2 factorial ANOVAs were used to test for the main effect of couple type, main effect of gender, and a possible couple type by gender interaction on the dependent variable of degree of conflict. Although the hypotheses only concerned the main effect for couple type, the other effects were examined because they were of

interest. Next, 2 X 2 factorial ANOVAs were used to test for the main effect of couple type, main effect of gender, and a possible couple type by gender interaction on the dependent variable of steps taken to leaving the relationship. Subsequently, ANCOVAs were used to test whether conflict level mediated between couple type and steps taken to leave the relationship, with couple type and gender as the independent variables, level of conflict as the covariate, and steps taken to leave the relationship as the dependent variable. Finally, A 2 X 2 ANOVA was used to test whether degree of mutual constructive communication moderated the relationship between couple type and level of conflict.

Tests of the Hypotheses

Test of Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 stated that the level of overall conflict will be higher for individuals in interracial relationships than for individuals in same-race relationships. A 2 X 2 factorial ANOVA was conducted in which one independent variable was couple type (same-race versus interracial) and the other independent variable was the individual's gender. Table 8 presents the results of this ANOVA.

Table 8

ANOVA for Total Level of Conflict as a Function of Couple Type and Gender

Source	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Couple Type	1299.992	1	1299.992	5.191	.023
Gender	3607.544	1	3607.544	14.405	<.001
Couple Type x Gender	6.116	1	6.116	0.024	.876
Error	201867.285	806	250.443		
Total	1076338.000	810			

The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for couple type [$F(1, 806) = 5.19$; $p = .023$]. There was also a significant main effect for gender [$F(1, 806) = 14.41$; $p < .001$], but no significant couple type by gender interaction. The cell means for these effects can be found in Table 9.

Table 9

Means for RIS Total Score (Conflict)

	Females	Males	Total
Same-Race (n = 666)	34.82 (SD = 16.35)	29.52 (SD = 15.20)	32.14 (SD = 15.99)
Diff Race (n = 144)	38.36 (SD = 15.06)	32.61 (SD = 16.90)	35.40 (SD = 16.23)
Total	35.44 (SD = 16.17)	30.08 (SD = 15.54)	

For the main effect of couple type, the mean for total conflict was higher for individuals in interracial relationships ($M = 35.40$, $SD = 16.23$) than for individuals in same-race relationships ($M = 32.14$, $SD = 15.99$). The higher level of overall conflict in interracial couples was as hypothesized and is congruent with the homogamy perspective. There was no hypothesis regarding a gender difference, but it was found that females ($M = 35.44$, $SD = 16.17$) reported greater conflict in their couple relationships than males did ($M = 30.08$, $SD = 15.54$) in this sample.

As an exploratory aspect of the study, possible differences between individuals in interracial and same-race relationships in conflict in specific areas of relationship functioning were examined. As noted in the description of the RIS in the Measures section of this thesis, a principal component analysis was conducted on the full set of RIS items to identify underlying dimensions of conflict areas, finding items that clustered together, and five RIS subscales representing different areas of conflict were identified. The same types of 2 X 2 factorial ANOVAs that were conducted for the total RIS scores reported above were run for each of the five RIS conflict subscales as a dependent

variable (communication and cohesiveness, trust, personal habits and preferences, life goals, time management) as well as for two individual RIS items (relationship with friends, relationship with family of origin) that did not load on those five RIS factors. Again, the independent variables for each ANOVA were couple type and gender.

There was a significant main effect for couple type on personal habits and preferences [$F(1, 896) = 3.962; p = .047$], life goals [$F(1, 910) = 5.447; p = .020$], and relationship with family of origin [$F(1, 918) = 7.186; p = .007$]. Conflict in these areas was reported to be higher by individuals in interracial relationships than individuals in same-race relationships. Two areas of conflict, communication and cohesiveness [$F(1, 832) = 3.357; p = .067$] and time management [$F(1, 918) = 2.874; p = .090$] had non-significant trends in the same direction for couple type; trust and relationships with friends had no main effect for couple type.

There was a significant main effect for gender on communication, trust, personal habits and preference, and life goals, with female participants reporting higher conflict than male participants. There were no gender differences for time management, relationships with friends, and relationships with family of origin. No significant couple type by gender interaction was found for any of the areas of conflict. The cell means for these effects can be found in Tables 10-16.

Table 10

Communication and Cohesiveness Conflict as a Function of Couple Type and Gender

	Females	Males	Total
Same-Race (n = 689)	1.59 (SD = .75)	1.36 (SD = .79)	1.48 (SD = .78)
Diff Race (n = 147)	1.77 (SD = .67)	1.45 (SD = .99)	1.61 (SD = .86)
Total	1.62 (SD = .74)	1.37 (SD = .83)	
Couple Type: $F(1, 832) = 3.357; p = .067$			
Gender: $F(1, 832) = 15.232; p < .001$			

Table 11

Trust Conflict as a Function of Couple Type and Gender

	Females	Males	Total
Same-Race (n = 738)	1.33 (SD = .97)	1.11 (SD = .91)	1.22 (SD = .95)
Diff Race (n = 162)	1.30 (SD = .89)	1.16 (SD = .84)	1.24 (SD = .87)
Total	1.32 (SD = .95)	1.12 (SD = .03)	
Couple Type: $F(1, 896) = .010; p = .919$			
Gender: $F(1, 896) = 4.858; p = .028$			

Table 12

Personal Habits and Preference Conflict as a Function of Couple Type and Gender

	Females	Males	Total
Same-Race (n = 740)	.95 (SD = .67)	.82 (SD = .64)	.89 (SD = .66)
Diff Race (n = 160)	1.05 (SD = .72)	.95 (SD = .65)	1.00 (SD = .68)
Total	.97 (SD = .68)	.84 (SD = .64)	
Couple Type: $F(1, 896) = 3.962; p = .047$			
Gender: $F(1, 896) = 4.387; p = .036$			

Table 13

Life Goals Conflict as a Function of Couple Type and Gender

	Females	Males	Total
Same-Race (n = 753)	1.11 (SD = .74)	1.01 (SD = .69)	1.06 (SD = .72)
Diff Race (n = 161)	1.30 (SD = .77)	1.10 (SD = .67)	1.20 (SD = .73)
Total	.97 (SD = .68)	.84 (SD = .64)	
Couple Type: $F(1, 910) = 5.447; p = .020$			
Gender: $F(1, 910) = 5.824; p = .016$			

Table 14

Time Management Conflict as a Function of Couple Type and Gender

	Females	Males	Total
Same-Race (n = 757)	1.32 (SD = .97)	1.15 (SD = .78)	1.24 (SD = .88)
Diff Race (n = 165)	1.35 (SD = .84)	1.38 (SD = .94)	1.36 (SD = .88)
Total	1.33 (SD = .94)	1.18 (SD = .81)	
Couple Type: $F(1, 918) = 2.874; p = .090$			
Gender: $F(1, 918) = .979; p = .323$			

Table 15

Relationships with Friends Conflict as a Function of Couple Type and Gender

	Females	Males	Total
Same-Race (n = 756)	1.11 (SD = 1.07)	1.12 (SD = 1.05)	1.11 (SD = 1.06)
Diff Race (n = 166)	1.15 (SD = 1.09)	1.29 (SD = 1.11)	1.22 (SD = 1.10)
Total	1.11 (SD = 1.07)	1.15 (SD = 1.06)	
Couple Type: $F(1, 918) = 1.364; p = .243$			
Gender: $F(1, 918) = .670; p = .413$			

Table 16

Relationship with Family of Origin Conflict as a Function of Couple Type and Gender

	Female	Male	Total
Same-Race (n=757)	1.03 (SD=1.09)	.93 (SD=1.09)	.98 (SD=1.09)
Diff Race (n=165)	1.29 (SD=1.07)	1.18 (SD=1.15)	1.24 (SD=1.11)
Total	1.08 (SD=1.09)	.98 (SD=1.10)	
Couple Type: $F(1, 918) = 7.186; p = .007$			
Gender: $F(1, 918) = 1.270; p = .260$			

Test of Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 stated that individuals in interracial relationships will report taking greater steps toward leaving their relationships than individuals in same-race relationships will report. A 2 X 2 factorial ANOVA was conducted in which one independent variable was couple type (same-race versus interracial) and the other

independent variable was gender, and the dependent variable was individuals' total scores on the MSI-R. Table 17 presents the results of this ANOVA.

Table 17

ANOVA for Steps toward Leaving the Relationship as a Function of Couple Type and Gender

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Couple Type	106.787	1	106.787	5.559	.006
Gender	324.766	1	324.766	16.908	.018
Couple Type x Gender	3.238	1	3.238	0.169	< .001
Error	17786.602	926	19.208		
Total	50334.000	930			

There was a significant main effect for couple type [$F(1, 926) = 5.56; p = .006$], and a significant main effect for gender [$F(1, 806) = 16.91; p = .018$], as well as the couple type by gender interaction [$F(1, 806) = .17; p < .001$]. The cell means for these effects can be found in Table 18.

Table 18

Means for MSI-R Scores (Steps Taken to Leave the Relationship)

	Females	Males	Total
Same-Race (n = 666)	6.54 (SD = 4.43)	4.87 (SD = 4.39)	5.68 (SD = 4.49)
Diff Race (n = 144)	7.26 (SD = 4.30)	5.89 (SD = 4.22)	6.59 (SD = 4.30)
Total	6.68 (SD = 4.41)	5.05 (SD = 4.37)	

For the main effect of couple type, the mean for steps taken to leave the relationship was significantly higher for individuals in interracial relationships ($M = 6.59$, $SD = 4.30$) than for individuals in same-race relationships ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 4.49$). The higher level of steps taken to leave the relationship in interracial couples was as hypothesized and is in line with the higher divorce rates for interracial married couples

when compare to same-race couples. There was no gender hypothesis, but it was found that females ($M = 6.68$, $SD = 4.41$) reported taking more steps to leaving the relationship than males ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 4.37$) in this sample.

Regarding the significant couple type by gender interaction effect, the cell means indicate that the pattern of greater steps toward leaving among different-race couples than among same-race couples is greater for males (1.02) than for females (0.72). These results show that gender also functions as a moderator in steps to leave the relationship with couple type as the independent variable. Since there was a significant age difference between males in interracial relationships and males in same-race relationships, the correlations between age and conflict/steps toward leaving were run but not found to be significant.

Test of Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 stated that the difference in steps taken to leave the relationship by individuals in interracial relationships and individuals in same-race relationships will be mediated by the level of overall conflict that the individual experiences in areas of their relationship. A 2 X 2 factorial ANCOVA was conducted in which one independent variable was couple type (same-race versus interracial), the other independent variable was gender, the covariate was the level of total conflict in the relationship (RIS total score), and the dependent variable was steps toward leaving the relationship (MSI-R score). Table 19 presents the results of this ANCOVA.

Table 19

ANCOVA for Conflict as a Mediator of Steps Taken to Leave the Relationship

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Conflict	3686.971	1	3686.971	263.340	< .001
Couple Type	6.416	1	6.416	0.458	.268
Gender	128.408	1	128.408	9.171	.003
Couple Type x Gender	.170	1	0.170	0.012	.912
Error	10066.572	719	14.001		
Total	14495.463	724			

When overall conflict was controlled through inclusion of the covariate, there was no significant main effect for couple type [$F(1, 719) = .458; p = .268$]. This supports the hypothesis that level of conflict accounts for the relationship between couple type and steps taken toward leaving the relationship. There still was a significant main effect for gender [$F(1, 719) = 9.171; p = .013$], in which females report more steps taken to leave the relationship than males report. There was no significant couple type by gender interaction [$F(1, 719) = .012; p = .912$]. The cell means for these effects can be found in Table 20.

Table 20

Means for Steps Taken to Leave the Relationship with Conflict as Mediating Variable

	Females	Males	Total
Same-Race (n = 589)	6.69 (SD = 4.43)	4.79 (SD = 4.34)	5.71 (SD = 4.51)
Diff Race (n = 135)	7.54 (SD = 4.34)	5.53 (SD = 4.02)	6.53 (SD = 4.29)
Total	6.86 (SD = 4.47)	4.93 (SD = 4.29)	

When controlling for level of conflict, there was no significant difference in steps toward leaving the relationship for individuals in same-race relationships and individuals in interracial relationships.

Test of Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 stated that the couple's degree of mutual constructive communication behavior will moderate the association between couple type and degree of relationship conflict. A 2 X 2 factorial ANOVA was conducted in which one independent variable was couple type (same-race versus interracial) and the other was level of mutual constructive communication, with level of conflict as the dependent variable. The first step in this process was to categorize scores of mutual constructive communication into higher and lower levels. It was necessary to dichotomize the CPQ mutual constructive communication scale scores for the ANOVA by doing a median split for each gender. Based on such median splits, lower levels of mutual constructive communication were scores between 0 and 24 for females, and 0 and 27 for males. Higher scores on mutual constructive communication were between 24 and 45 for females and 28 and 45 for males. Table 21 summarizes the results of the ANOVA for female participants.

Table 21

ANOVA Mutual Constructive Communication as Moderator for Conflict (Female)

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Couple Type	408.645	1	408.645	1.749	.187
Comm-Female	2626.941	1	2626.941	11.243	.001
Couple Type x Comm-Female	.007	1	.007	0.000	.996
Error	63554.549	272	233.656		
Total	405694.000	276			

Note: Comm-Female = Mutual constructive communication for female participants

In the sample of female participants, there was no main effect for couple type [$F(1, 272) = 1.75; p = .187$] but there was significant main effect for constructive communication [$F(1, 272) = 11.24; p = .001$]. There was no significant couple type by communication interaction [$F(1, 272) = 0.00; p = .996$]. The cell means for these effects can be found in Table 22.

Table 22

Means for Conflict with Mutual Constructive Communication as Moderator (Female)

	Lower MCC	Higher MCC	Total
Same-Race (n = 229)	38.15 (SD = 14.91)	29.72 (SD = 16.69)	34.25 (SD = 16.27)
Diff Race (n = 47)	41.45 (SD = 12.00)	33.06 (SD = 13.68)	38.23 (SD = 13.18)
Total	38.78 (SD = 14.42)	30.21 (SD = 16.28)	

Note: MCC = Mutual constructive communication

For the main effect of couple type, the mean overall conflict was 38.23 ($SD = 13.18$) for females in interracial relationships and 34.25 ($SD = 16.27$) for females in same-race relationships, but that difference did not reach statistical significance. Females with lower scores on mutual constructive communication ($M = 38.78, SD = 14.42$) had significantly higher levels of overall conflict than females with high scores on constructive communication ($M = 30.21, SD = 16.28$). This shows a negative relationship in which more constructive communication is associated with less conflict. However, the non-significant interaction effect did not support the moderation hypothesis.

A second 2 X 2 factorial ANOVA was run for male participants, and the results are summarized in Table 23.

Table 23

ANOVA Mutual Constructive Communication as Moderator for Conflict (Male)

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Couple Type	192.857	1	192.857	0.977	.324
Comm-Male	9140.151	1	9140.151	46.293	< .001
Couple Type x Comm-Male	255.608	1	255.608	1.295	.256
Error	55481.362	281	197.443		
Total	308429.000	285			

Note: Comm-Male = Mutual constructive communication for male participants

Similar to the results for females in the study, in the sample of male participants, there was no main effect for couple type [$F(1, 281) = .98; p = .324$] but there was a significant main effect for constructive communication [$F(1, 281) = 46.293; p < .001$]. There was no significant couple type by communication interaction [$F(1, 281) = 1.30; p = .256$], which does not support the moderation hypothesis. The cell means for these effects can be found in Table 24.

Table 24

Means for Conflict with Mutual Constructive Communication as Moderator (Male)

	Lower MCC	Higher MCC	Total
Same-Race (n = 229)	34.61 (SD = 13.29)	22.32 (SD = 14.70)	28.91 (SD = 15.22)
Diff Race (n = 47)	39.22 (SD = 16.60)	22.00 (SD = 12.56)	29.62 (SD = 16.73)
Total	35.32 (SD = 13.89)	22.26 (SD = 14.23)	

Note: MCC = Mutual constructive communication

For the main effect of couple type, there was no significant difference between the mean for overall conflict for males in interracial relationships ($M = 29.62, SD = 16.73$) and the mean for males in same-race relationships ($M = 22.26, SD = 14.23$). Male participants with lower scores of mutual constructive communication ($M = 35.32, SD =$

13.89) had significantly higher levels of overall conflict than males with high scores of constructive communication ($M = 22.26$, $SD = 14.23$). This is the same negative relationship that was seen among females, where more communication is associated with less conflict.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide support for the notion that there are differences in levels of conflict and the degree of steps taken to leave the relationship between interracial and same-race couples. Overall conflict was found to be higher in interracial couples than same-race couples, and the same group difference was found to be true for specific areas of conflict such as personal habits and preferences as well as relationships with family of origin. Similarly, conflicts regarding communication and cohesiveness and time management followed the same trend of being higher in interracial couples than same-race couples, although those differences were not significant. Women were also more likely to report higher levels of overall conflict as well as higher conflict in areas such as communication, trust, personal habits and preference, and life goals. Individuals in interracial relationships had also taken more steps to leave the relationship than individuals in same-race relationships. Women were also more likely to have taken steps to leave the relationship than men; however, there was an interesting interaction pattern between couple type and gender in which the difference in steps taken to leave between men in interracial relationship and same-race relationships was greater than the difference between women in the two types of relationships. When level of conflict was controlled statistically in the analysis of covariance, no significant difference in steps taken towards leaving the relationship was found based on the couple's racial composition. This shows

that level of conflict functions as a mediator and accounts for the relationship between couple type and steps taken toward leaving the relationship.

Mutual constructive communication was also examined as a possible means of reducing conflict in couples. Mutual constructive communication and level of conflict were found to have a strong negative association, with high scores on mutual constructive communication being correlated with lower levels of conflict reported by both men and women. It was hypothesized that mutual constructive communication would moderate the association between couple type and level of conflict, but this relationship was not found for women or men. These results suggest that positive communication is related to less conflict, regardless of partner's race or the individual's gender. This is meaningful because communication can be considered a universal means of reducing conflict regardless of the racial composition of the couple.

The higher level of conflict in interracial couples is consistent with sociological patterns described in past research such as endogamy (people marrying within their group) and homogamy (people marrying persons close in status) (Kalmijn, 1998). According to these perspectives, relationships in which partners have more similar characteristics have fewer misunderstandings, less conflict, and greater support from their family and friends (Bratter & King, 2008; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). The results of this study support the view that a larger cultural gap between partners of different races will result in an increased risk for conflict and disagreement. Specifically, interracial couples reported more conflict than same-race couples in areas such as personal habits, personal manners, household tasks and management, taking care of possessions, personal standards for neatness, and personal grooming. These disagreements over lifestyle habits

can range from variances in food preferences, to how to clean the house, to arriving late or early to events, etc., and they are understandable if the two partners come from two distinctly different cultures. These individuals may have different customs, and when they come together to form a romantic relationship, it requires more adjustment than in a relationship between two people who have similar lifestyles and preferences.

In addition to disagreements surrounding personal habits and preferences, interracial couples seem to be experiencing more conflict regarding relationships with their families of origin. Lack of acceptance by family members has been a focus in the research on interracial couples (Karis, 2003) and has been pointed to as a source of stress. It is possible that lack of acceptance is causing conflict, but the conflict may be due to another layer of the cultural difference in the romantic relationship. One partner may struggle to understand the demands or viewpoints of their in-laws if there is a large cultural barrier. This may result in the other partner feeling defensive of his or her parents and cause arguments within the couple.

Although conflict on the topic of relationship with family was found to be significantly higher in interracial couples than same race couples, conflict regarding relationships with friends was not different for the two groups. This suggests that there may be more acceptance of interracial relationships among peer groups or people of a similar age group. Research suggests that attitudes toward interracial relationships change with each generation, and have been moving in a more positive, accepting direction (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000). Future research can explore these changes in attitudes by either 1) comparing conflict in interracial couples of different age groups to see if older couples have more conflict regarding their relationships with friends and family, or 2)

comparing couple data from different collection times (e.g., 10 years ago to today). In addition, individuals have a choice of who they deem to be part of their circle of friends; therefore, partners of interracial relationships may choose to be close to people who support their choice in romantic partner.

Trends in divorce rates between same-race and interracial couples show higher rates of marital dissolution in interracial couples (Bratter & King, 2008; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). This dissolution pattern was reflected in the present results as well and shows that the divorce potential or possibility of ending a romantic relationship is higher in interracial couples. More importantly, level of couple conflict explained the differences in steps taken to leave the relationship between interracial couples and same-race couples in this study.

An unexpected finding was that the tendency for members of interracial couples to take greater steps toward leaving the relationship than those in same-race relationships was greater for men than for women. This suggests that men may be more reactive to the dynamics involved in being in an interracial relationship than women are. This gender-race interaction is one that has not been mentioned previously in the literature and merits further exploration. One possible explanation is that men in interracial relationships are especially quicker to leave than their counterparts in same-race couples due to feeling less commitment to the relationship when it is with someone of a different race than their own. Another possible reason that the difference is smaller for women might be that when women enter interracial relationships, it is already with the mindset that the relationship will require more adjustment and therefore a higher degree of tolerance before taking steps to leave.

An important finding of this study was that mutual constructive communication was associated with less conflict in couple relationships regardless of their racial composition. The lack of significant differences or interactions based on couple type shows that regardless of whether partners are the same race or different, communication may help in conflict resolution.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study has provided statistically significant and clinically useful findings, there are aspects of it that limit the application of its results. First, the sample that supplied the data was not randomly selected from the general population. The data were gathered from couples who had sought therapy at a clinic located in a university setting in one area of the country, so it cannot be assumed that the results are generalizable to the general population of couples in the United States. In addition, because the data are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, we cannot draw any causal conclusions about the pathways of influence among couple type, level of conflict, and steps taken toward leaving relationships. The study does not capture changes over time in conflict and steps taken toward leaving the relationship.

Another limitation in this study was the small number of interracial couples in this sample. Only 92 interracial couples were identified out of the sample of 564 couples, and those couples were comprised of a variety of racial combinations (Hispanic-White, Black-White, and Hispanic-Black being the most common). Due to this small number, it was necessary to pool the data from all of the different interracial couples, thereby losing the ability to look at possible differences based on specific racial combinations. Previous qualitative research suggests that cultural differences play a large role in the conflict that

occurs in interracial couples. If different racial identities carry different cultural traditions, then it can be assumed that the areas of conflict may vary based on the culture and racial identity of the partners. Divorce rates also vary in interracial samples based on racial composition of the couple (e.g., Hispanic-Black couples have lower divorce rates than Black-Black populations). In addition, since there are still certain racial groups in the United States that are less likely to intermarry (The Pew Research Center, 2012), it would be interesting to explore whether these differences in intermarriage between certain groups are associated with more conflict in romantic relationship between individuals of those groups. Furthermore, the literature review briefly touched on potential power differences between individuals of certain races and how this might influence couple relationships. Therefore, future research could look at majority-minority (e.g., White-Black) couple combinations as compared to minority-minority (e.g., Asian-Hispanic) interracial couples. It is possible that less conflict exists between partners with similar status levels (two minorities) versus a couple in which partners are from two different levels of society (one majority and one minority).

Because this study did not examine whether participants were born in the United States, or the length of time that partners have lived in the same country, in future studies it would be important to consider the levels of acculturation of the two partners. It would be necessary to look at the residential status of the participants, number of years living in the United States, whether their parents live in the United States, and whether language differences contribute to conflict in interracial couples.

Another limitation of this study is that the sample was comprised of couples who sought couple therapy from the Center for Healthy Families. These couples are usually

experiencing higher levels of relationship distress than the general population, so the results of this study are not generalizable to all couples. Therefore, it would be important to replicate the study in non-clinical community samples.

Another avenue for future research would be to identify other potential moderators of the relationship between couple racial composition and conflict. For example, this study only identified mutual constructive communication as a moderator and found no differences for couple type. However it is possible that negative communication, such as a demand-withdraw pattern, may be found to have different effects on conflict and steps towards leaving based on the racial composition of the couple. Other facilitators of steps taken to leave the relationship may also be explored, such as partners' different attachment styles or availability of social support.

Implications of the Findings

The information gathered in this study has rich implications for researchers and clinicians alike. This study was one of the few that has looked at interactional patterns of interracial and same-race samples. Prior information on interracial couples has typically employed two types of research methods: quantitatively analyzing census data for descriptive information on this population and qualitative interviews with relatively small numbers of interracial couples. Using the Center for Healthy Families' extensive collection of data on a clinical sample, this study was able to look for statistically significant differences and trends to support previous hypotheses regarding conflict in interracial romantic relationships.

The significant differences that were found for conflict and steps taken toward leaving the relationship based on the couples' racial composition demonstrated that there

is a need to acknowledge the unique experiences of individuals who enter interracial romantic partnerships. Differences in upbringing, background, families of origin, and racial experiences may need to be made more explicit in conversations that occur in the therapy room. Clinicians can explore conflict within these areas, and positive forms of communication can be taught as a means to negotiate cultural differences.

This research also has implications for homogamy theory. Despite partners of similar backgrounds reporting less conflict and fewer steps toward leaving the relationship, the number of interracial relationships being formed is still on the rise. This study suggests that even if partners come from different backgrounds and have different racial identities, through positive communication, conflict can be negotiated and reduced. The goal of this work is to find solutions that build upon the strengths of the couple to help them create more meaningful and lasting relationships through positive communication.

These results also support the idea that conflict is inherent in relationships due to the negotiation of individual needs and available resources. However, as the results have shown, there are also ways to overcome these conflicts rather than to end the relationship. Mutual constructive communication is one way in which both same-race and interracial couples reduce conflict and future research can explore other methods for preventing relationship dissolution.

This study demonstrated that interracial couples are faced with unique challenges and more areas that require negotiation. However, it is also important to emphasize the strengths of these types of couples. The diverse nature of interracial couples provides these families with a great wealth of cultural resources. Individuals who enter

relationships with someone of a different race are presented with an opportunity to learn and grow from these differences. As with all relationships, approaching these differences with an open mind and positive communication can help interracial couples overcome conflict.

APPENDIX 1

RIS

There are a variety of areas in a couple's relationship that can become sources of disagreement and conflict. Please indicate how much each of the areas is **presently** a source of disagreement and conflict in your relationship with your partner. Select the number on the scale which indicates how much the area is an issue in your relationship.

0 = Not at all a source of disagreement or conflict
1 = Slightly a source of disagreement or conflict
2 = Moderately a source of disagreement or conflict
3 = Very much a source of disagreement or conflict

- | | |
|---|---|
| ____1. Relationships with friends | ____16. Leisure activities and interests |
| ____2. Career and job issues | ____17. Household tasks and management |
| ____3. Religion or personal philosophy of life | ____18. Amount of time spent together |
| ____4. Finances (income, how money is spent, etc.) | ____19. Affairs |
| ____5. Goals and things believed important in life | ____20. Privacy |
| ____6. Relationship with family of origin (parents, siblings) | ____21. Honesty |
| ____7. Sexual relationship | ____22. Expressions of caring and affection |
| ____8. Child rearing/parenting approaches | ____23. Trustworthiness |
| ____9. Personal habits | ____24. Alcohol and drugs |
| ____10. Amount of commitment to the relationship | ____25. Taking care of possessions |
| ____11. Understanding of each other's stresses or problems | ____26. Personal standard for neatness |
| ____12. Daily life schedules and routines | ____27. How decisions are made |
| ____13. Personal manners | ____28. Personal grooming |
| ____14. How negative thoughts and emotions are communicated | |
| ____15. How positive thoughts and emotions are communicated | |

APPENDIX 2

Structure Matrix

	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Relationship with friends	.263	-.426	.167	.113	-.256	.504
Career and job issues	.110	-.119	.262	.745	-.224	-.073
Religion or personal philosophy of life	.136	-.073	.064	.546	-.386	.260
Goals and things believed important in life	.330	-.247	.323	.761	-.329	.052
Finances	.334	-.325	.424	.648	-.152	-.030
Relationship with family of origin (parents, siblings)	.443	-.127	.279	.324	-.128	.489
Child rearing/parenting approaches	.486	-.153	.290	.313	-.360	.177
Personal habits	.120	-.224	.626	.281	-.520	.147
Amount of commitment to the relationship	.538	-.628	.269	.347	-.412	.005
Understanding of each other's stresses or problems	.625	-.370	.259	.285	-.372	.001
Daily life schedules and routines	.227	-.152	.306	.347	-.714	-.033
Personal manners	.401	-.293	.608	.175	-.414	.193
How negative thoughts and emotions are communicated	.674	-.193	.258	.242	-.210	.109
How positive thoughts and emotions are communicated	.615	-.320	.338	.257	-.296	-.013
Leisure activities and interests	.224	-.299	.327	.333	-.749	.139
Household tasks and management	.330	-.139	.651	.422	-.421	-.091
Amount of time spent together	.385	-.379	.247	.266	-.693	-.068
Affairs	.102	-.762	.127	.097	-.210	-.049
Privacy	.172	-.703	.265	.169	-.297	.066
Honesty	.221	-.853	.216	.211	-.167	.177
Expressions of caring and affection	.528	-.472	.274	.246	-.413	-.263
Trustworthiness	.257	-.850	.203	.227	-.232	.161
Alcohol and drugs	-.220	-.375	.194	.170	-.343	.293
Taking care of possessions	.155	-.359	.645	.399	-.245	.140
Personal standard for neatness	.258	-.092	.814	.302	-.207	-.013
How decisions are made	.543	-.318	.555	.477	-.291	.081
Personal grooming	.175	-.168	.701	.170	-.129	-.050
Sexual relationship	.337	-.151	.306	.297	-.252	-.500

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

APPENDIX 3

MSI-R

We would like to get an idea of how your relationship stands right now. Within the past four months have you...

- Yes ___ No___ 1. Had frequent thoughts about separating from your partner, as much as once a week or so.
- Yes ___ No___ 2. Occasionally thought about separation or divorce, usually after an argument.
- Yes ___ No___ 3. Thought specifically about separation, for example how to divide belongings, where to live, or who would get the children.
- Yes ___ No___ 4. Seriously thought about the costs and benefits of ending the relationship.
- Yes ___ No___ 5. Considered a divorce or separation a few times other than during or shortly after a fight, but only in general terms.
- Yes ___ No___ 6. Made specific plans to discuss separation with your partner, for example what you would say.
- Yes ___ No___ 7. Discussed separation (or divorce) with someone other than your partner (trusted friend, minister, counselor, relative).
- Yes ___ No___ 8. Discussed plans for moving out with friends or relatives.
- Yes ___ No___ 9. As a preparation for living on your own, set up an independent bank account in your own name to protect your interest.
- Yes ___ No___ 10. Suggested to your partner that you wish to have a separation.
- Yes ___ No___ 11. Discussed separation (or divorce) seriously with your partner.
- Yes ___ No___ 12. Your partner moved furniture or belongings to another residence.
- Yes ___ No___ 13. Consulted an attorney about legal separation, a stay away order, or divorce.
- Yes ___ No___ 14. Separated from your partner with plans to end the relationship.
- Yes ___ No___ 15. Separated from your partner, but with plans to get back together.
- Yes ___ No___ 16. Filed for a legal separation.
- Yes ___ No___ 17. Reached final decision on child custody, visitation, and division of property.
- Yes ___ No___ 18. Filed for divorce or ended the relationship.

APPENDIX 4

CPQ

Directions: We are interested in how you and your partner typically deal with problems in your relationship.

Please rate each item on a scale of 1 (=very unlikely) to 9 (=very likely).

	Very									
Very										
A. WHEN SOME PROBLEM IN THE RELATIONSHIP ARISES:										<u>Unlikely</u>
<u>Likely</u>										
1. Both members avoid discussing the problem.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
2. Both members try to discuss the problem.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
3. I try to start a discussion while my partner tries to avoid a discussion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
My partner tries to start a discussion while I try to avoid a discussion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	

	Very									
Very										
B. DURING A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM:										<u>Unlikely</u>
<u>Likely</u>										
1. Both members blame, accuse, and criticize each other.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
2. Both members express their feelings to each other.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
3. Both members threaten each other with negative consequences.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
4. Both members suggest possible solutions and compromises.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
5. I nag and demand while my partner withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
My partner nags and demands while I withdraw, become silent, or refuse to discuss the matter further.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
6. I criticize while my partner defends his/herself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
My partner criticizes while I defend myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
7. I pressure my partner to take some action or stop some action, while my partner resists.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
My partner pressures me to take some action or stop some action, while I resist.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
8. I express feelings while my partner offers reasons and solutions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
My partner expresses feelings while I offer reasons and solutions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
9. I threaten negative consequences and my partner gives in or backs down.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
My partner threatens negative consequences and I give in or back down.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
10. I call my partner names, swear at them, or attack their character.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
My partner calls me names, swears at me, or attacks my character.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
11. I push, shove, slap, hit, or kick my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
My partner pushes, shoves, slaps, hits, or kicks me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	

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