

Ideal Mate Characteristics Among Low-Income and Racially Diverse Couples

Koret Scholars: Rian Dixon, Hannah Brownlee, Andrea D. Ramirez, Angela Shaw
Dr. Teresa Nguyen Department of Psychology

Background

Research has identified that racially diverse and low income couples are experiencing lower rates of marriage and higher rates of divorce. Previous hypotheses believe this is due to the absence of “marriageable” partners (Lichter et al., 1992).

Issues in prior research:

- Little regard for sociocultural and economic factors
- Sampled from predominantly white, middle class, college students
- Emphasis on the attributes of the individual (e.g., attractiveness, personality)

Study Aim

This research aims to identify which positive attributes about marital partners are salient to low income and ethnically diverse couples

Methods

Participants

- 431 low-income Latinx, Black, and White couples

Data Collection Method

- Free-listening/open-ended interviews
- Participants were asked to identify the traits they found most desirable in their marital partner
- Allowed for exploration of partner characteristics

Data Analysis Methods

- Responses were coded through a combination of theme identification methods

References

Fletcher, G. J. O., Simpson, J. A., Thomas, G., & Giles, L. (1999). Ideals in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76(1), 72-89. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.76.1.72>

Lichter, D., McLaughlin, D., Kephart, G., & Landry, D. (1992). Race and the Retreat From Marriage: A Shortage of Marriageable Men? *American Sociological Review*, 57(6), 781-799. doi:10.2307/2096123

Results

- Preliminary analysis of this longitudinal data suggest that factors beyond physical attractiveness and personality were highly salient to our sample of low-income couples
- Specifically, couples reported that their spouses' financial decision making, spouses' parenting style, and spouses' positive relationships with extended family were key attributes that they found desirable in their partner

Theme	
Fletcher et al., 1999 Ideal Standards	
Warmth-Trustworthiness	29.53%
Vitality-Attractiveness	26.05%
Intimacy-Loyalty	9.93%
Passion	8.74%
Status-Resources	3.03%
Novel Ideal Mate Characteristics	
Status-Resources	6.28%
Morality-Religiosity (Ties with Society)	4.22%
Cooperation Against Resource Adversity	12.21%

Discussion and Implications

Previous studies (Fletcher 1999) on ideal mate characteristics have focused on warmth, trust, and intimacy between spouses. However, those with limited resources also prioritize other partner traits (e.g., being a financial provider, communication) that emphasize survival and cooperation. This includes the partner having ties with an extended network, their church community, and general cooperation (e.g., Selflessness).

- Current models of desirable partner characteristics may miss the salient reasons that low-income, ethnically diverse couples marry
- Efforts to combat divorce and strengthen marriages within this population may be better served by directing attention to extended network members and religious communities