

Study finds link between marriage attitudes and risky sexual behaviors

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Risky sexual behaviors among adolescents and young adults has long been a major public health concern, due to their prevalence and negative consequences for health, such as increased risk for sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancies, and cervical cancer. Past research has indicated that marriage attitudes may influence sexual behavior for adolescents. Now, new research from the University of Missouri, has found that attitudes and desires about marriage can place young people on trajectories toward or away from healthy sexual behaviors. This is the first study to investigate links between marriage attitudes and sexual behavior across racial and ethnic minority groups as well as the role skin tone plays in shaping marriage attitudes.

"Understanding the impact of marriage and cohabitation attitudes on decisions about sex is important because this work may help scholars and professionals better understand how such beliefs impact behaviors," said Antoinette Landor, assistant professor in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. "Further, examining what early factors influence risky sex can lead to better prevention."

Landor, along with Carolyn Tucker Halpern, professor in the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina, analyzed surveys from nearly 7,000 adolescents from diverse backgrounds to determine sexual behaviors and attitudes about monogamous relationships. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, non-Caucasians remain at higher risk for sexually transmitted disease compared to Caucasians. Thus, they

considered data on race, [skin tone](#), sexual behavior and personal interest in marriage for the study.

Researchers found that [positive attitudes](#) toward marriage had a significant dampening effect on risky behaviors for lighter-skinned African Americans and Asians compared with their darker skin counterparts, who had more negative attitudes toward marriage. The findings suggest that skin tone plays a role in views toward relationships and marriage, thus impacting decisions about [sexual behavior](#) for some people.

"These findings offer important implications for policy and prevention," Landor said. "Rather than just focusing on skill building, clinicians and educators could develop materials that promote healthy attitudes toward romantic relationships which could ultimately encourage healthy decision-making and behaviors. Results also suggest that skin tone may be a culturally relevant factor to consider in [public health](#) campaigns involving sexual health among minority groups."

"The Enduring Significance of Skin Tone: Linking Skin Tone, Attitudes toward Marriage and Cohabitation, and Sexual Behavior," was published in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. The research was supported by funding from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and by the Carolina Population Center.

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