



Monday, July 1, 2002

## Professor known for divorce research

Associate Professor of Sociology Terri Orbuch is garnering national attention for her recently published article, "Who will divorce: A 14-year longitudinal study of black couples and white couples."

The article, in April's "Journal of Social and Personal Relationships," examines the predictors of divorce for African-American and white couples. The research is part of Orbuch's "Early Years of Marriage" project, which is following 373 couples that were married in 1986.

"It's a unique study because we're interviewing participants alone and with their spouse, so we're getting each partner's perspective of the marriage," Orbuch said.

Data is collected in waves, including years one, two, three, four, seven and 14. Couples in the study are the same race and in their first marriage. To date, 30 percent of the white couples are divorced and 50 percent of the African-American couples are divorced.

Orbuch, an Oakland University faculty member since 1998, joined the study in 1990. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin – Madison and also is a marriage counselor and therapist.

"It's important for therapists and counselors to understand that the same factors don't predict divorce for everyone. There's not a top-ten list. There are different factors for different people," Orbuch said.

Orbuch analyzes these factors – including everything from who does the housework to the education level of each partner – in the article.

### Research Highlights

When there is conflict in a marriage, there is a difference in divorce rates depending on whether it's the husband or the wife who's reporting it. Marriages where the wife reports frequent conflict have a greater chance of divorce, while marriages where men report high conflict do not have the same risk of divorce.

"Husbands who are experiencing conflict are more likely to let it go and not dwell on it. Wives try to resolve and hold on to the conflict for a longer period of time. This ultimately leads to distress which may disrupt the marriage," Orbuch explains.

Marriages where men regularly hear "I love you" and "You're important to me" are less likely to divorce. These words of affection carry a great deal of weight in the marriage, from a man's perspective. The research finds that husbands who don't feel affectively affirmed from their wives are more likely to divorce over the first 14 years of marriage. However, marriages where wives do not feel affirmed do not have the same risk of divorce over time.

"This is because women have many sources of affirmation in their network of family and friends," Orbuch said. "For men in general, their marital partner is their primary source of affirmation."

One behavior has consistently shown that it leads to divorce despite race or gender.

"Across the board, we find couples who use destructive conflict resolution, such as shouting or physically aggressive behavior are more likely to divorce," Orbuch said. "Couples who understand each other and use constructive styles of conflict management, including paraphrasing and 'we' statements, are less likely to divorce."

In the study, both husbands and wives report their involvement in household chores and childcare tasks. The research finds that African-American husbands share these tasks more equally with their wives than white husbands. And, African-American husbands who participate in household chores are less likely to divorce, as reported by both husbands and wives. For white couples, the husband's participation is not a factor in whether or not the couple will divorce.

Another notable factor that predicts divorce in the first 14 years of marriage is the impact of the wife's level of education. The study finds that marriages with highly educated women are less likely to divorce.

"This is true for both groups of couples," said Orbuch. "Educated wives bring resources to the marriage that protect the relationship from divorce. These resources may include increased power, prestige and status or higher financial earnings."

The main message of Orbuch's research is individuals have different meanings of marriage depending on their gender and race/ethnicity.

"Plus, marriages do not live in a vacuum. We're all influenced by our families and the larger community, which teaches us the meanings of marriage and relationships," Orbuch said. "These meanings of marriage then shape our evaluations of our own experiences in marriage and impact whether marriages are stable over time. These norms and expectations are different for each of us, depending if we're male or female, African-American or white."

**SUMMARY**

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