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## First Journey by a Descriptive Review of Empirical Research on African Marital Relationships—Scientific Dissemination, Thematic Focus, and Methodology

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### ABSTRACT

Family and marital research remains unrepresentative in African societies. The current study is a descriptive literature review of empirical research on African marital relationships published in peer-reviewed journals since the beginning of the 21st century. The aim of this study was to describe this body of research with regard to its methodology, main thematic foci, and scientific dissemination. Ninety studies published across 63 scientific journals were identified, with the majority of them using a quantitative and cross-sectional design. Marital satisfaction/quality and marital stability/instability were the two themes most frequently explored in the studies. Results also revealed that the number of published articles on the topic and the diversity of themes addressed have seen an increase over the years. Implications for the development of further research on African marital relationships are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

African; Afro-American; black; literature review; marriage

Despite the growing scientific interest in marital relationships across Western societies, particularly in populations facing specific challenges (e.g., economic and social disadvantage, Afro-Americans, intercultural marriages) (Fincham & Beach, 2010), research on family and marital relationships, as on psychology in general, is unrepresentative in many parts of the world, such as in African societies. This may be mainly due to economic, communication, and value-related factors (Adams, 2004) and to the knowledge dominance of Western societies (Adams, 2004; Berry, 2013; Cooper, 2013; Cooper & Nicholas, 2012). In fact, this gap in empirical research hampers the development of preventive and therapeutic practices as well as a reflection on and change to public policies on family and conjugality to improve psychological well-being and quality of life in African societies (Aluko & Aransiola, 2003; Animasahun & Oladeni, 2012; Ebinuwa-Okoh, 2011; Erhabor & Ndlovu, 2013). The aim of the current study is, therefore, to conduct a descriptive review (Paré, Trudel, Jaana, & Kitsiou, 2015) of the empirical research on

African marital relationships since the beginning of the 21st century, focusing particularly on the research methodology, the main themes addressed, and some scientific dissemination characteristics. A summary of the results found within the empirical literature under study will be presented and discussed in a second scientific paper, already under way.

### ***African family and marriage—When cultural singularity means cultural plurality***

Culture refers to the distinctive and singular set of spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, which includes art, literature, lifestyles, ways of living, values, traditions, and beliefs (UNESCO, 2001). Cultural diversity is a core factor for the development and well-being of society (UNESCO, 2001), thus the need to expand and further scientific knowledge on cultural pluralism is particularly important. However, as far as psychology is concerned, although the concept of culture has been deemed a crucial variable, this discipline, until recently, has largely remained culture-blind, given the undervaluation of the power of culture (e.g., roles, meanings, traditions) in the development of human emotions, cognitions, behaviors, and relationships (Berry, 2013). Mirroring this cultural blindness in global psychology, specific research on marital relationships is unrepresentative in many parts of the world, particularly in African countries (Adams, 2004).

Africa is a kind of cultural mosaic due to its geographical extension; different historical roots, events, and trajectories; and ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity (Altuna, 2014; Burgos, 2007), thus constituting an invaluable source of data for the enrichment of scientific knowledge on family structures and processes. The literature reveals numerous examples of the diversity and transformation that characterize the African family: common family structural configurations—the small nuclear or conjugal family, vertically extended family, horizontally extended family, polygamous family—(Adams, 2010); the current controversy regarding polygamy (Altuna, 2014; Sooryamoorthy & Chetty, 2015) and its steep decline (Fenske, 2015), even though in some countries, it is still a marriage arrangement symbolizing status and tradition (Altuna, 2014; Bagnol, 2008; George, Ukpong, & Imah, 2014); the change in traditional marriage rituals (Altuna, 2014; Dintwat, 2010), which have increasingly been observed to include characteristics akin to those of Western marriages (Pauli, 2011); the decrease in the number of marriages, the increase in marital cohabitation (LaTaillade, 2006; Sooryamoorthy & Chetty, 2015), and the changes in the roles and duties of family members, particularly women (Sooryamoorthy & Chetty, 2015).

The so-called African ethnic minorities may be added to this cultural mosaic, namely, the African-American population, made up of individual African descendants who survived slavery in the USA as well as the migrant

population in countries of Western cultures. LaTaillade (2006) highlights the negative impact of macrocultural factors such as social discrimination and economic difficulties, often experienced by ethnic minorities, which appear to contribute to the increase in divorce rates and to the decline in the number of marriages among the Afro-American population.

Conjugality is a cross-sectional phenomenon to all races and ethnicities (George et al., 2014). Notwithstanding increased divorce rates and plummeting marriage percentages all over the world, scientific articles including the word “marriage” in their title increased by approximately 48% in the 1990s, compared with the preceding decade (Fincham & Beach, 2010). However, despite evident progress in understanding families and marriages in several cultures, there is still a long way to go in the field of psychology, and particularly in empirical research (Adams, 2004; Fincham & Beach, 2010). Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) critically claim that there is a trend among scientists to publish a universal thesis on human behavior in the world’s top journals based on samples from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies, implicitly undervaluing the variation across human populations. In the same vein, Berry (2013) proposes the achievement of a more global psychology through the development of indigenous psychologies around the world, followed by comparisons among them.

The cultural plurality of African marriages and their characteristic processes of continuity and change, point to the need for the development of scientific knowledge in this area to, as stated by Carter and McGoldrick (1995), understand the impact of micro and macrocultural factors on the family and their implications for quality of life. Accordingly, several authors (Allwood & Berry, 2006; Jackson, 2005) have argued that psychology should reflect the social, economic, political, and cultural nature of populations around the world.

### **Current study**

Considering the gap in the research on African marital relationships (Adams, 2004; Fincham & Beach, 2010), it is the aim of this study to characterize the empirical research published in international scientific journals since the beginning of the 21st century. This characterization has been conducted through a descriptive literature review (Paré et al., 2015) on the subject, considering the following three questions regarding the empirical research on African marital relationships:

1. What are the main research approaches, designs, and sampling processes?
2. What are the main themes of focus?
3. What is the current state of affairs as regard scientific dissemination (diversity and saturation of publications in international scientific journals and the publication evolution over time)?

## Method

### *Search strategy and data sources*

To respond to the aforementioned three research questions, a descriptive literature review was performed, as it was our aim to find interpretable patterns or trends regarding scientific dissemination, methodological issues, and thematic foci (Paré et al., 2015) in the empirical research on marital relationships since the beginning of the 21st century. This review followed the recommendations of Paré et al. (2015) concerning rigor, relevance, and internal consistency. Thus, structured search methods were used to obtain a representative sample of the published scientific articles on the subject. The evidence-based guidelines for systematic reviews set forth in the PRISMA statement (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2010) were also taken into consideration.

The search was conducted in several relevant databases (B-On: Online Knowledge Library—Search, Ovid, Proquest, Web of Knowledge, and Google Scholar) through the EBSCO Discovery Services (EDS—Advanced Research). In each database, we used the following three search group of terms (limited to the title): (1) “marriage,” “marital,” or “couple”; (2) “satisfaction,” “quality,” “communication,” “conflict,” “intimacy,” “love,” or “sexuality”; (3) “Africa,” “African,” “South Africa,” and several African countries, including those whose official language is Portuguese (e.g., “Nigeria,” “Egypt,” “Ghana,” “Zambia,” “Angola,” “Mozambique,” “Cape Verde,” “Guinea,” “São Tome and Principe”). Each search consisted of a combination of the search terms of one group connected by “AND” to the terms of the other groups. All the searches were confined to the time frame of 2000 to December 2016.

### *Study selection*

The initial searches yielded a total of 218 scientific papers available in English or Portuguese (not including duplicates). After constraining the searches to scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals and written in English, all the abstracts were read to enable a selection based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) empirical study (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed study); (b) published between 2000 and 2016; (c) focusing on marriage or marital cohabitation in African ethnic populations; (d) focusing mainly on psychological processes; (e) including participants in a heterosexual marital relationship (legal marriage or marital cohabitation). Therefore, literature reviews, theoretical overviews, study cases, and empirical studies whose main thematic foci were closer to other sciences (e.g., law, public health, agriculture, economics, medicine) than to psychology were excluded. The final selection consisted of 90 scientific articles that were found to meet the inclusion criteria. Full-text versions were obtained and read.

Finally, the main researcher conducted a coding process using the software NVIVO—version 11 to ensure greater objectivity in the selection and data analysis and to delete duplicated articles. Each scientific article was coded into the following categories and subcategories: “name of scientific journal,” “year of publication,” “type of research approach” (“quantitative,” “qualitative,” “mixed”); “main thematic focus” (e.g., “quality or satisfaction,” “communication,” “intimacy,” “HIV,” “violence”); “design” (“cross sectional,” “longitudinal”); “sample” (“dimension,” “geographic origin,” “other information—e.g., “recruitment process,” “participants’ sex,” “unit”: “individual”; “couple”). Two senior members of the research team who specialize in qualitative analysis reviewed this coding process. All the discrepancies were discussed until an agreement among the two senior members and the main researcher was reached. Table 1 displays a summary of the reviewed empirical studies.

## Results

A total of 218 scientific papers available in full text were identified in the database searches. Of these, only 90 met all the defined inclusion criteria and were included in this review. The results of this study are presented on the basis of the aforementioned three research questions.

**Table 1.** Summary of the empirical studies reviewed.

Author(s), years	Study design	Sample size	Sample geographic origin	Main variables
Addai, Opoku-Agyeman, and Amanfu (2015)	QUANT CS	1,533	Ghana	Marital status Subjective well-being
Akinsulure-Smith, Chu, Keatley, and Rasmussen (2013)	QUAL; Focus group, SSI CS	32	USA	Violence
Allen and Olson (2001)	QUANT  CS	830 (415 couples)	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality Marital stability/ instability
Animasahun and Femi (2011)	QUANT CS	250	Nigeria	Marital stability/ instability
Animasahun and Oladeni (2012)	QUANT	84 (42 couples)	Nigeria	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Barton et al. (2015)	LONG QUANT	228 (164 couples)	USA	Marital intervention Marital satisfaction/ quality
	LONG			Marital intervention Beliefs
Barton and Bryant (2016)	QUANT	560 (280 couples)	USA	Marital stability/ instability
	LONG			Financial strain

(Continued)

**Table 1.** Continued.

Author(s), years	Study design	Sample size	Sample geographic origin	Main variables
Bent-Goodley (2014)	QUAL; Focus group CS	22 (11 couples)	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality Intervention HIV Violence Marital status
Botha and Booyesen (2013a)	QUANT CS	12,923	South Africa	Marital status
Botha and Booyesen (2013b)	QUANT CS	4,900	South Africa	Marital status
Bratter and Eschbach (2006)	QUANT  CS	NA (Thousands)	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality Interracial marriage
Brown, Orbuch, and Bauermeister (2008)	QUANT LONG	446 (373 couples)	USA	Marital stability/ instability
Bryant, Taylor, Lincoln, Chatters, and Jackson (2008)	QUANT  CS	1,522	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality Financial strain
Calvès (2016)	QUANT  CS	2,036	Burkina Faso	Marital stability/ instability Marital status
Chaney (2010)	QUAL; SSI CS	64 (32 couples)	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Chaney (2014a)	QUAL; SSI CS	60 (30 couples)	USA	Marital stability/ instability
Chaney (2014b)	QUAL; SSI CS	120 (60 couples)	USA	Marital stability/ instability
Chaney, Mitchell, and Barker (2014)	QUANT  CS	60	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality Marital status Engagement
Chin (2013)	QUANT CS	NA (Thousands)	Multiple Africa	HIV Violence
Conroy et al. (2016)	QUANT  CS	846 (448 couples)	South Africa	Marital satisfaction/ quality HIV
Cox, Hindin, Otupiri, and Larsen-Reindorf (2013)	QUANT CS	1,396 (698 couples)	Ghana	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Crowder and Tolnay (2000)	QUANT LONG	NA (Thousands)	USA	Interracial marriage
Cutrona et al. (2003)	QUANT  CS	404 (202 couples)	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality Neighborhood Financial strain
Cutrona, Russel, Burzette, and Wesner (2011)	QUANT  LONG	414 (207 couples)	USA	Marital stability/ instability Financial strain Religiousness
Dabone (2014)	QUANT CS	320	Ghana	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Durevall and Lindskog (2015)	QUANT CS	26,000	Multiple Africa	HIV Violence

(Continued)

**Table 1.** Continued.

Author(s), years	Study design	Sample size	Sample geographic origin	Main variables
Ebenuwa-Okoh (2011)	QUANT CS	2,561	Nigeria	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Ellison, Burdette, and Wilcox (2010)	QUANT	2,400	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Erhabor and Ndlovu (2013)	CS QUANT	500	South Africa	Religiousness Marital satisfaction/ quality
Esere, Yeyeodu, and Oladun (2014)	QUANT	660	Nigeria	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Esere, Yusuf, and Omotosho (2011)	CS QUANT	600	Nigeria	Religiousness Marital stability/ instability
Fenske (2015)	QUANT CS	494,157 (only women)	Multiple Africa	Marital concurrency
Fincham, Ajayi, and Beach (2011)	QUANT	978 (487 couples)	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Fledderjohann (2012)	CS QUAL; SSI	107 (only women)	Ghana	Religiousness Marital satisfaction/ quality
Fox (2014)	CS QUANT CS	NA (Thousands)	Multiple Africa	Infertility HIV Marital concurrency Religiousness
Garcia (2006)	MIX Quantitative- Ethnographic Interviews- Observation- Documents CS	500–1,000	Spain	Intercultural marriage
Goodwin (2003)	QUANT  LONG	247	USA	Marital satisfaction/ quality Extended family support individual resources Religiousness Economic resources
Greeff and Bruyne (2000)	QUANT CS	114 (57 couples)	South Africa	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Green, Doherty, Fothergill, and Ensminger (2012)	QUANT LONG	1,049	South Africa	Marital status Marital stability/ instability Physical health Psychological health
Gumani and Sodl (2009)	QUAL; SSI CS	5 (only women)	South Africa	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Hattori and Dodoo (2007)	QUANT CS	2,024	Kenya	HIV Marital concurrency
Hofmeyr and Greeff (2002)	QUANT	116 (only men)	South Africa	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Hosegood, McGrath, and Moultrie (2009)	LONG QUANT LONG	NA (Thousands)	South Africa	Sexual satisfaction Marital status

*(Continued)*



**Table 1.** Continued.

Author(s), years	Study design	Sample size	Sample geographic origin	Main variables
Igbo, Grace, and Christiana (2015)	QUANT	200	Nigeria	Marital satisfaction/quality
	CS			Marital stability/instability
James (2014)	QUANT	2,640	USA	Marital satisfaction/quality
	LONG			Marital stability/instability Marital status
Khawaja and Milner (2012)	QUAL; Focus group	13	Australia/ Sudan	Marital satisfaction/quality
Klomegah (2008)	CS	8,897	Zambia	Stress of acculturation
	QUANT			HIV
Marks et al. (2008)	CS	120 (60 couples)	USA	Violence
	QUAL; SSI			Marital satisfaction/quality
Marks, Tanner, Nesteruk, Chaney, and Baumgartner (2012)	CS	60 (30 couples)	USA	Religiousness
	QUAL; SSI			Marital satisfaction/quality
Martin, Cui, Ueno, and Fincham (2013)	CS	15,701	USA	Religiousness
	QUANT			Interracial marriage
Mashele, Poggenpoel, and Myburgh (2006)	CS	6 (only women)	South Africa	Violence
	QUAL; SSI			Marital satisfaction/quality
Mcneil, Fincham, and Beach (2014)	CS	974 (487 couples)	USA	Marital stability/instability
	QUANT			Extended family
Miller et al. (2009)	CS	10	Kenya	Marital satisfaction/quality
	QUAL; Focus group			Intervention
Modie-Moroka (2010)	CS	30 (only women)	Botswana	Sexuality
	QUAL; SSI			HIV
Moller, Rabe, and Nortje (2001)	CS	37	South Africa	Violence
	QUANT			Marital satisfaction/quality
Moore (2008)	CS	2,759 (only women)	Togo	Beliefs
	QUANT			Violence
Moore and Govender (2013)	CS	954	South Africa	Marital status
	QUANT			Beliefs
Morgan et al. (2005)	CS	24 (12 couples)	USA	Marital satisfaction/quality
	QUAL; SSI			Breast cancer
Ngazimbi, Daire, Soto, Carlson, and Munyon (2013)	CS	200	USA/ Immigrants	Marital satisfaction/quality
	QUANT			Expectations
NIMH Multisite HIV/STD Prevention Trial for African American Couples Group (2010a)	CS	1,070 (535 couples)	USA	HIV
	QUANT			

(Continued)

**Table 1.** Continued.

Author(s), years	Study design	Sample size	Sample geographic origin	Main variables
NIMH NIMH Multisite HIV/STD Prevention Trial for African American Couples Group (2010b)	QUANT CS	1,070 (535 couples)	USA	HIV
Ogbuagu (2012)	QUAL; SSI	40	Nigeria	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Ogunsola (2011)	CS QUANT	3,824	Nigeria	Violence Marital satisfaction/ quality
Oluwole (2008)	CS QUANT	2,000 (only women)	Nigeria	Marital status Marital satisfaction/ quality
O'Neal, Arnold, Lucier-Greer, Wickrama, and Bryant (2015)	CS QUANT CS	1,012 (506 couples)	USA	Religiousness Financial strain Relationships stress
Onsy and Amer (2014)	QUANT	411	Egypto	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Onyishia, Sorokowski, Sorokowska, and Pipitone (2012)	CS QUANT	374	Nigeria	Marital intervention Marital satisfaction/ quality
Osakinle and Okafor (2013)	CS QUANT CS	240 (120 couples)	Nigeria	Children Marital quality/ satisfaction
Ottu and Akpan (2011)	QUANT	150	Nigeria	Marital satisfaction/ quality
Oyewo and Akanbi (2012)	CS QUANT	344	Nigeria	Religiousness Marital satisfaction/ quality
Pauli (2011)	CS MIX Quantitative- Ethnographic Interviews- Observation- Documents	500–1,000	Namibia	Job performance Marriage rituals
Pazvakawambwa, Indongo, and Kazembe (2013)	CS QUANT CS	NA (Thousands)	Namibia	Marital status
Phillips, Wilmoth, and Marks (2012)	QUANT CS	142 (71 couples)	USA	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Marital Stability/ Instability
Posel and Casale (2013)	QUANT CS	NA (Thousands)	South Africa	Marital Status Marital Concurrency
Shapiro and Gebreselassie (2014)	QUANT CS	NA (Thousands) (only women)	Multiple Africa	Marital Status
Stanik and Bryant (2012a)	QUANT LONG	940 (470 couples)	USA	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality

(Continued)

**Table 1.** Continued.

Author(s), years	Study design	Sample size	Sample geographic origin	Main variables
Stanik and Bryant (2012b)	QUANT CS	697	USA	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Sexual Satisfaction
Stanik, Mchale, and Crouter (2013)	QUANT LONG	146	USA	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality
Steinbugler (2015)	QUAL; SSI CS	84 (42 couples)	USA	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Interracial couples Racial Identity
St. Vil (2015)	QUANT CS	NA (Thousands)	USA	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Social Support
Takyi (2001)	QUANT CS	3,593 (only women)	Ghana	Marital Stability/ Instability
Takyi and Broughton (2006)	QUANT CS	3,593 (only women)	Ghana	Marital Stability/ Instability
Taylor, Brown, Chatters, and Lincoln (2012)	QUANT CS	6,082	USA/ Caribbeans	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Marital Status Extended family support
Tenkorang, Owusu, Yeboah, and Bannerman (2013)	QUANT CS	1,835 (only women)	Ghana	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Violence
Tolorunleke (2014)	QUANT CS	200	Nigeria	Marital Stability/ Instability
Usoroh, Ekot, and Inyang (2010)	QUANT CS	350	Nigeria	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Marital Stability/ Instability
Vaterlaus, Skogrand, and Chaney (2015)	QUAL; SSI CS	78 (39 couples)	USA	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Marital Stability/ Instability Intervention
Walque (2007)	QUANT CS	NA (Thousands)	Multiple Africa	HIV Intervention
Wechsberg et al. (2015)	QUAL; Focus group CS	79	South Africa	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Marital Intervention HIV Religiousness
Wickrama, Bryant, and Wickrama (2010)	QUANT CS	1,080 (540 couples)	USA	Marital Satisfaction/ Quality Perception of community disorder Health

Note. QUANT, quantitative study; QUAL, qualitative study; MIX, mixed study; CS, crosssectional; LONG, longitudinal; SSI, semistructured interview; NA, not available.

### ***Methodological approaches, designs, and sampling processes***

As regards the methodological approaches adopted in the empirical studies reviewed, the results revealed that 77.8% ( $n = 70$ ) followed a quantitative approach, 20% ( $n = 18$ ) a qualitative approach, and only 2.2% ( $n = 2$ ) were mixed studies, thus pointing to a clear predominance of quantitative research. Longitudinal designs were presented only in the quantitative studies, even though the majority of them (81%,  $n = 57$ ) used a cross-sectional design.

As for sample size in the quantitative research was reviewed, the following figures were observed: 20 studies with samples ranging from 100 to 500 participants; 14 studies with over 10,000 participants; 11 with between 501 and 1,000 participants; 12 with between 2,000 and 10,000; 10 with a range between 1,001 and 2,000; and only 3 studies reported a sample with under 100 participants. It should be noted that the samples of 20 studies (all with a sample size below 2,000 participants) included both members of the couple as participants. In the majority of the studies reviewed, samples comprised both men and women. Only 11 studies reported samples composed exclusively of women and one of men. As far as the sampling process is concerned, most of the studies used a convenience strategy, collecting data from the community population; however, several studies (mainly those with larger sample sizes) used the support of national surveys or projects.

In the qualitative research reviewed, almost all the studies had samples ranging from 10 to approximately 100 participants. Only in two studies the samples consist of fewer than 10 participants. Seven studies included both members of the couple, and four studies involved samples composed exclusively of women. The sampling process was conducted through a convenience strategy, collecting data from the community.

The two studies with a mixed approach were composed of between 500 and 1,000 participants. The exact number was not reported, possibly due to their ethnographic nature and the triangulation of data collection methods. Both studies used interviews, document analysis, community observation, and quantitative data stored in previous databases.

Regarding the geographic origin of the samples, 37 studies had been developed in the USA with Afro-Americans ( $n = 36$ ) or African immigrants ( $n = 1$ ), indicating that almost 41% of the studies considered in this review did not use participants living in Africa. Among the remaining studies, 59% ( $n = 53$ ) had been conducted with local African participants, 15 with participants from Nigeria, 14 with participants from South Africa, 6 with samples composed of participants from several African countries (mostly Sub-Saharan Africa), and 6 with participants from Ghana. Studies were also encountered using samples from other African countries (e.g., Egypt, Kenya, Namibia, Zambia).

Among the 18 qualitative studies, 10 had been developed in the USA with Afro-Americans ( $n = 9$ ) or African immigrants ( $n = 1$ ), and one study had been performed in Australia with African refugees. The remaining studies reported samples with participants from South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and Botswana. One of the mixed studies included a sample of African immigrants in Spain and the other a sample of Afro-Americans.

### **Main thematic focus**

A qualitative analysis of the reviewed scientific articles on African marital relationships was conducted, enabling the identification of main themes in this body of research. This process was accomplished through the identification of the variables under study (mainly in the Abstract and Method sections of the scientific articles), the analysis of the excerpts corresponding to objectives, and also an analysis of the “Results” section. Table 2 presents the identified main themes in the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed studies and indicates the number of sources/studies in which they emerged.

The results evidenced the relevance of *marital quality or marital satisfaction—patterns and processes*, in the quantitative studies; and *representations and experiences in marital satisfaction and quality* in the qualitative studies—suggesting that this is a core research theme in African marital relationships. Although the analysis process revealed that the conceptual boundaries between these two constructs—quality and satisfaction—are not always clear, marital satisfaction emerged as a subjective and positive evaluation of the relationship (and the partner), whereas marital quality was mostly related to the perception of marital processes that contribute to a balanced or unbalanced functioning of the relationship. The quality-related processes most frequently studied were communication and conflict.

**Table 2.** Main themes in the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed studies.

Methodological approach	Main themes
Quantitative	Patterns and processes of marital quality or satisfaction ( $n = 34$ ). Patterns of marital stability vs. instability ( $n = 14$ ). Marital status ( $n = 14$ ). Factors associated to cohabitation or marriage ( $n = 10$ ). Marital status and well-being ( $n = 4$ ). The role of religiousness on marital relationships ( $n = 11$ ). HIV and marital relationships ( $n = 10$ ). Patterns of marital violence ( $n = 6$ ). Impact of financial strain ( $n = 5$ ). Patterns of marital concurrency—polygamy or extramarital relationships ( $n = 4$ ). The role of beliefs and expectations ( $n = 4$ ). Intervention with couples ( $n = 4$ ). Interracial marriages ( $n = 3$ )
Qualitative	Representations and experiences on marital satisfaction and quality ( $n = 16$ ). Marital quality and health ( $n = 5$ ). Intervention with couples ( $n = 4$ ). Marital violence ( $n = 4$ ). Influences on marital stability vs. instability ( $n = 3$ ). Marital quality and cultural issues ( $n = 2$ ). The role of religiousness ( $n = 2$ )
Mixed	Patterns of intercultural marriages ( $n = 1$ ). Marriage rituals ( $n = 1$ )

*Note.* The content in brackets correspond to the number of studies in which the respective main themes were identified.

Moreover, the results pointed to *patterns of marital stability vs. instability*—emerging as the relational processes and conditions that might contribute to the maintenance or disruption of a relationship—another main theme of the reviewed research. As shown in [Table 2](#), *marital status* (particularly the *factors associated with marriage vs. cohabitation*), *role of religiousness*, *HIV within the context of marital relationships*, *marital violence*, *health conditions*, *the impact of financial strain*, *marital concurrency* (through polygamy or extramarital affairs), *intervention with couples*, *beliefs*, and *expectations about marriage*, *interracial marriages*, and *cultural issues* also arose as relevant issues in the empirical literature reviewed. Other themes also emerged, albeit in only a few studies, such as the *impact of community environment on marital quality*, *the role of extended family*, and *the role of social support*.

## **Scientific dissemination**

### **Scientific journals**

The 90 selected studies were published across 63 scientific journals related to different areas of knowledge, such as: social sciences in general and sociology and ethnology specifically (e.g., *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *Population Research and Policy Review*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*); family psychology and family therapy (e.g., *Family Process*, *Contemporary Family Therapy*); clinical and health (e.g., *Journal of Health Psychology*, *AIDS & Behavior*, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *Social Science & Medicine*); gender (e.g., *Sex Roles*, *Gender & Behavior*); sexuality and reproduction (*International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, *Journal of Sex Research*); economics (e.g., *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, *Journal of Health Economics*). The titles of seven journals referred specifically to the African population: *African Journal of AIDS Research*, *African Nebula*, *African Review of Economics and Finance*, *Journal of African Studies and Development*, *Journal of Afro-American Studies*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Journal of Psychology in Africa*. It should be noted that only three of these journals are indexed in the SCImago Journal Rank.

Furthermore, 14 journals, 7 of which in the area of family psychology, were found to have published more than one article included in this review, namely, five articles by *Marriage & Family Review*; four by *Family Relations*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, and *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*; three by *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, and *AIDS & Behavior*; two by *Demographic Research*, *Gender & Behavior*, *Journal of Family and Violence*, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, *Personal Relationships*, and *Social Science & Medicine*. Each of the remaining journals published only one of the 90 articles selected for the present review. As far as the methodological

approach is concerned, it is worth mentioning that the publication of quantitative studies was observed among all 14 of these journals, while qualitative studies were only published by four, such as the *Journal of Psychology in Africa* and the *Marriage and Family Review*, each with three such publications.

### **Years of publishing**

Considering the selected scientific articles, the results suggested an increasing publication trend: 10.0% ( $n = 9$ ) studies were published between 2000 and 2005, 24.4% ( $n = 22$ ) between 2006 and 2010, and 65.6% ( $n = 59$ ) between 2011 and 2016. Only three articles were published in 2016. With regard to methodological approaches, no qualitative study was published before 2005, and 12 were published after 2011. Quantitative studies were observed to have been published since 2000, with greater frequency after 2009. The two mixed studies were published in 2006 and 2011.

By cross-checking the evolution of the publication trend over the years and the main themes of research in African marital relationships, the following features were brought to light: the narrow range of research themes up to 2005, which gradually broadened as of 2006, and especially as of 2010; the continued relevance of the study of marital quality and satisfaction since 2000; as of 2010, the sharp rise in research on patterns of stability vs. instability, marital status, HIV, and other health issues, financial strain, marital concurrency, violence, religiousness, cultural issues, and intervention with couples.

### **Discussion**

This descriptive review aimed to collect and characterize empirical research on African marital relationships published in international scientific journals from the year 2000 up to December 2016. A qualitative analysis of these empirical studies was conducted to identify: their main research approaches, designs, and sampling processes; the main themes explored; and the characteristics of scientific dissemination in terms of the diversity and saturation of publications in international scientific journals as well as the publication evolution over time.

As previously stated, 90 scientific articles meeting the defined inclusion criteria were identified. This limited number of studies, considering the broad and increasing range of general literature on marital relationships (Fincham & Beach, 2010), confirms the scarcity of research on non-Western societies and the dominance of knowledge on the part of Western countries (Adams, 2004; Berry, 2013; Cooper, 2013).

Regarding the research approaches, this review revealed a clear predominance of quantitative studies, which is in line with the methodological trends

in psychology in general, and specifically in family psychology (Daly, 2007). However, qualitative methodologies, although representing a different lens through which reality may be viewed, may, in fact, be as appropriate and useful as quantitative methodologies. Moreover, qualitative approaches are particularly well suited to understanding the changeable, contextual, and complex nature of the family and its diversity and uniqueness (Daly, 2007). The analysis performed in this study also revealed a prevalence of cross-sectional studies. Nonetheless, longitudinal studies are more suitable for obtaining a holistic understanding of reality, as they enable an examination of individual and family growth and development trajectories over time. Most of the quantitative studies reported a sampling process by a convenience strategy, involving samples with over 500 participants. Importantly, almost one-third of all the selected studies included both members of the couple. This inclusion is highly relevant as it enables a deeper understanding of the processes inherent to intimate relationships, which are, by nature, interdependent. It also makes it possible to explore similarity and reciprocity within couples (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Finally, the geographic origin of the samples, mostly Afro-American, appears to mirror the trend among scientists to research human behavior based on Western samples instead of indigenous samples, therefore undervaluing a cultural and contextual-centered understanding of a broader and more diverse reality (Henrich et al., 2010).

Concerning the second research question (main themes of focus), the results suggested that the main and continued scientific interest regarding African marital relationships appears to be primarily associated with the patterns and processes of marital quality and satisfaction mainly related to communication and conflict. However, the results also showed a growing focus on patterns of stability vs. instability and on marital status, which may be explained by recent transformations in the African family, namely, the decline in the number of marriages and the increase in marital cohabitation (LaTaillade, 2006; Sooryamoorthy & Chetty, 2015); changes in family roles and functions (Sooryamoorthy & Chetty, 2015); changes in traditional marriage rituals (Dintwat, 2010); and greater similarity to Western marriages, thus challenging the African cultural identity (Pauli, 2011). The present review also identified studies addressing themes such as HIV (and other health problems) within the context of marital relationships, marital concurrency, violence, and financial strain. Such themes are often interrelated, possibly due to current health and psychosocial concerns in Africa (Barton & Bryant, 2016; Durevall & Lindskog, 2015; NIMH Multisite HIV/STD Prevention Trial for African American Couples Group, 2010a; Walque, 2007) and its cultural pluralism (Altuna, 2014).

As for scientific dissemination, considering the scarcity of empirical studies on African marital relationships, the diversity of scientific areas apparently interested in this subject (e.g., psychology and family psychology in particular,



social sciences, medicine, economics) is somewhat surprising. This appears to support the current relevance of family studies as part of a broad network of scientific knowledge, especially given its implications for society as a whole. Finally, the results also revealed a growing interest in the theme of this review, particularly as of 2010.

### ***Limitations and strengths of the present review***

First, it must be acknowledged that all reviews are limited since it is not plausible to have access to all the relevant publications meeting their inclusion criteria. In the case of the present review, our systematic search was also confined to publications in English, thus constraining its representativeness. In other words, the search strategy used may have hampered the access to significant empirical studies. Nevertheless, our search methods followed the main recommendations for systematic reviews set forth in the PRISMA statement (Moher et al., 2010; Paré et al., 2015) and used the software *NVIVO 11* during the search process and data analysis to provide quality and rigor. These options clearly represent the strengths of the present review.

The decision to restrict the analysis of the descriptive review to three issues—methodology, thematic focus, and scientific dissemination—without presenting a summary of the results found in the studies may also be interpreted as another limitation of this study. However, the broad range of reviewed studies would make this article too long if a summary of such findings was to be included. Therefore, a second article addressing this issue is now under way—a second journey through a descriptive review of empirical research on African marital relationships.

This descriptive review contributed not only to expand the knowledge on the research on African marital relationships but also to reinforce a scientific reflection on the unrepresentativeness of Western research in Africa. Considering the broad spectrum of literature on marital relationships in Western societies (Fincham & Beach, 2010) and, comparatively, the scarcity of empirical studies on this same issue in African cultures, the present descriptive review appears to confirm the gap in empirical research which, as mentioned above, is possibly due to economic, communication, and value-related factors (Fincham & Beach, 2010), but not indissociable from the knowledge dominance of Western societies (Cooper, 2013; Cooper & Nicholas, 2012). Considering the cultural diversity within Africa (Altuna, 2014; Burgos, 2007) and the well-known influence of culture on the development of emotions, cognitions, behaviors, and relationships (Berry, 2013), there is a clear need to expand the further scientific knowledge on the African family and marital relations. Increased scientific knowledge in this domain would undoubtedly be a powerful source for the development of preventive

and therapeutic practices and for rethinking and changing public policies on family and conjugality.

### **Future directions**

This review supports the premise that developing contextually rooted cross-cultural research is of invaluable relevance. It is only by doing so that culture-blindness in psychology may be avoided and the social, political, and cultural features of a given society may be unveiled, without the lens of a dominating cultural perspective (Adams, 2004; Berry, 2013). Thus, quantitative and qualitative research, particularly with indigenous samples and including longitudinal designs, should be encouraged to develop knowledge on African family structures and processes. Furthermore, this type of design would make it possible to access and examine meanings and experiences, to identify individual, family strengths, and vulnerabilities, and to assess and understand the impact of micro and macrocultural factors as well as their impact on quality of life. In the family psychology domain, the knowledge grounded on contextually rooted research could chiefly favor the enrichment of clinical intervention as well as the (re)formulations of public policies related to the African family and marital relationships.

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