

# The Association Between Parental Relationships and Measures of Happiness From Adolescence to Adulthood

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## Introduction

- Research suggests that maternal and paternal closeness are positively associated with child and adolescent well-being (Amato, 1994). However, less is known about whether one parental relationship contributes more strongly to happiness across teenage years and adulthood.
- Data from the National Survey of Families and Households and AddHealth indicate that parent-child warmth predicts emotional health, but the importance of mothers versus fathers is still debated.
- Previous studies have highlighted differences between maternal and paternal influence, yet findings have been contradictory and heterogeneous (Baiocco & Pistella, 2022)
- Moreover, research examining the association between parental relationships and happiness rarely follows respondents from adolescence into adulthood.

## Research Questions

- Which parental relationship, maternal or paternal shows a stronger association with happiness during adolescence and adulthood?
- How do racial demographics influence the association between parental closeness and happiness?
- Do maternal and paternal closeness remain significant predictors of happiness when race is included in a multivariate model?

## Methods

### Sample

- Teens (grades 7th to 12th) and adults (late 30s/early 40s) who measured their parental relationship status and happiness levels were drawn from the first and fifth wave of the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (AddHealth).

### Measures

- Happiness (Wave 1):** Initially assessed using the sum of two items rating frequency of happiness for teens. Scores ranged from 0–3. However, a binary variable was created to identify high vs low happiness.
- Happiness (Wave 5):** Another binary used to capture how often adult's levels of happiness
- Parental Closeness:** Maternal and paternal closeness were assessed on a 1–5 scale. Higher scores indicated stronger closeness.
- Race:** Respondents categorized into five groups (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Other)

## Results

### Univariate

- Among teens, 69% reported the strongest possible maternal closeness, while 54% reported the strongest paternal closeness.
- Among adults, 49% reported the strongest maternal closeness, but only 35% reported the strongest paternal closeness.
- Teens reported higher average happiness compared to adults; low happiness levels almost doubled in Wave 5.

### Bivariate

In Wave 1, chi-square tests showed that both maternal and paternal closeness were significant predictors of happiness binary among teens:

- Teen-Father closeness:  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$
- Teen-Mother closeness:  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$  (exact value was closer to 0)

In Wave 5, chi-square tests showed that both maternal and paternal closeness were significant predictors of happiness binary among adults:

- Adult-Father relationship:  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$  (exact value was closer to 0)
- Adult-Mother relationship:  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$

Figure 1. Happiness Binary in relation to Teen maternal relationships

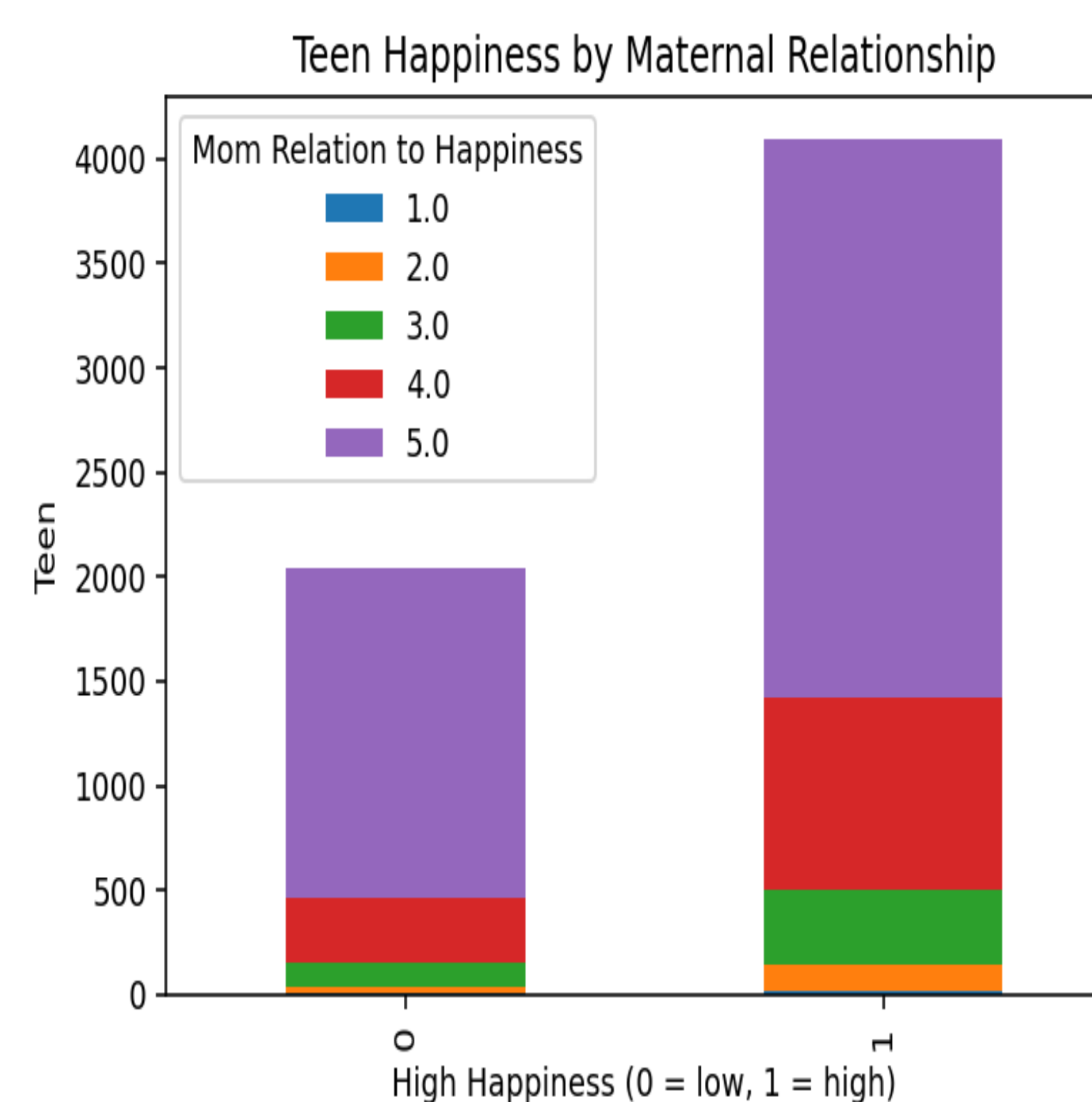
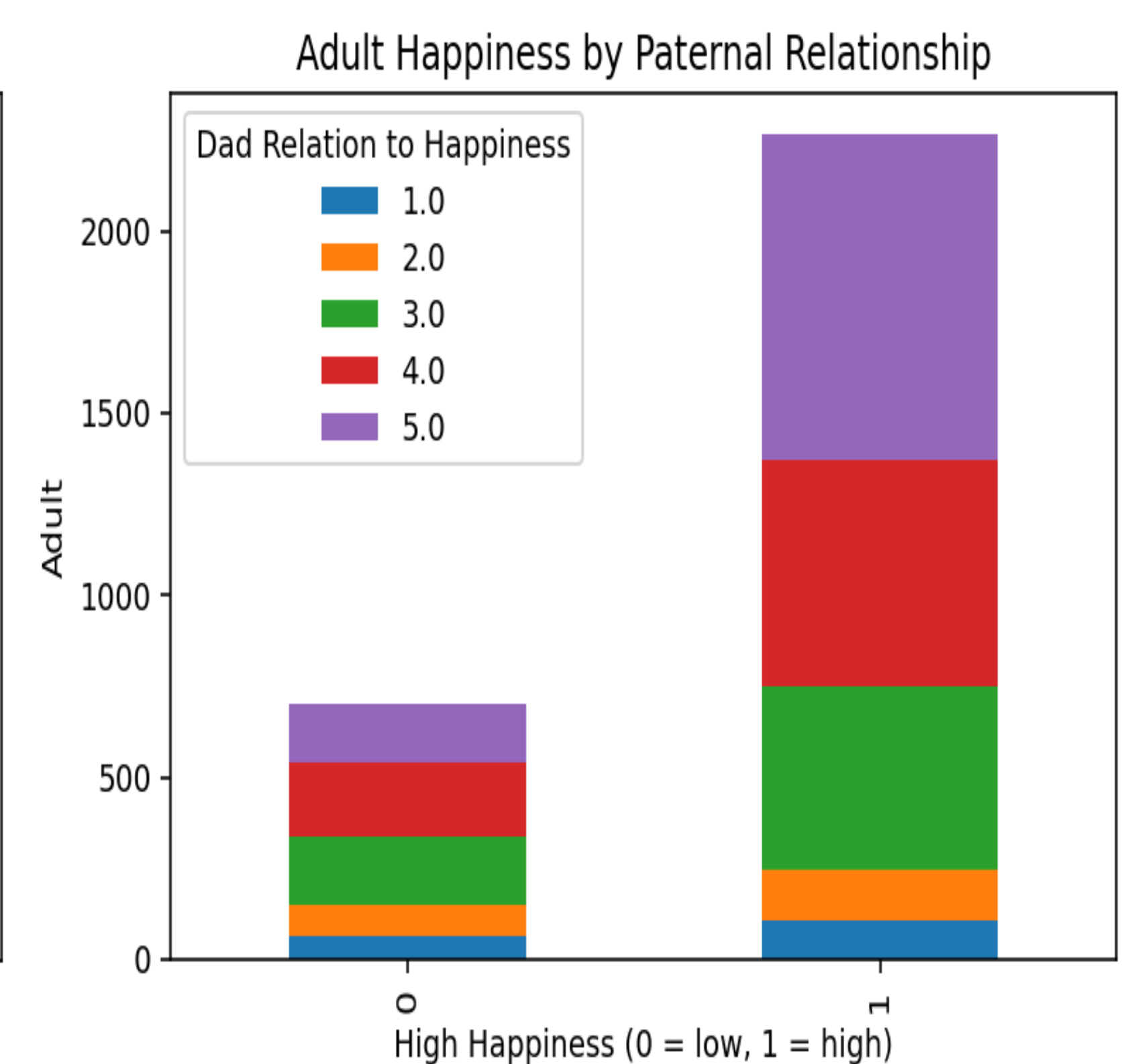


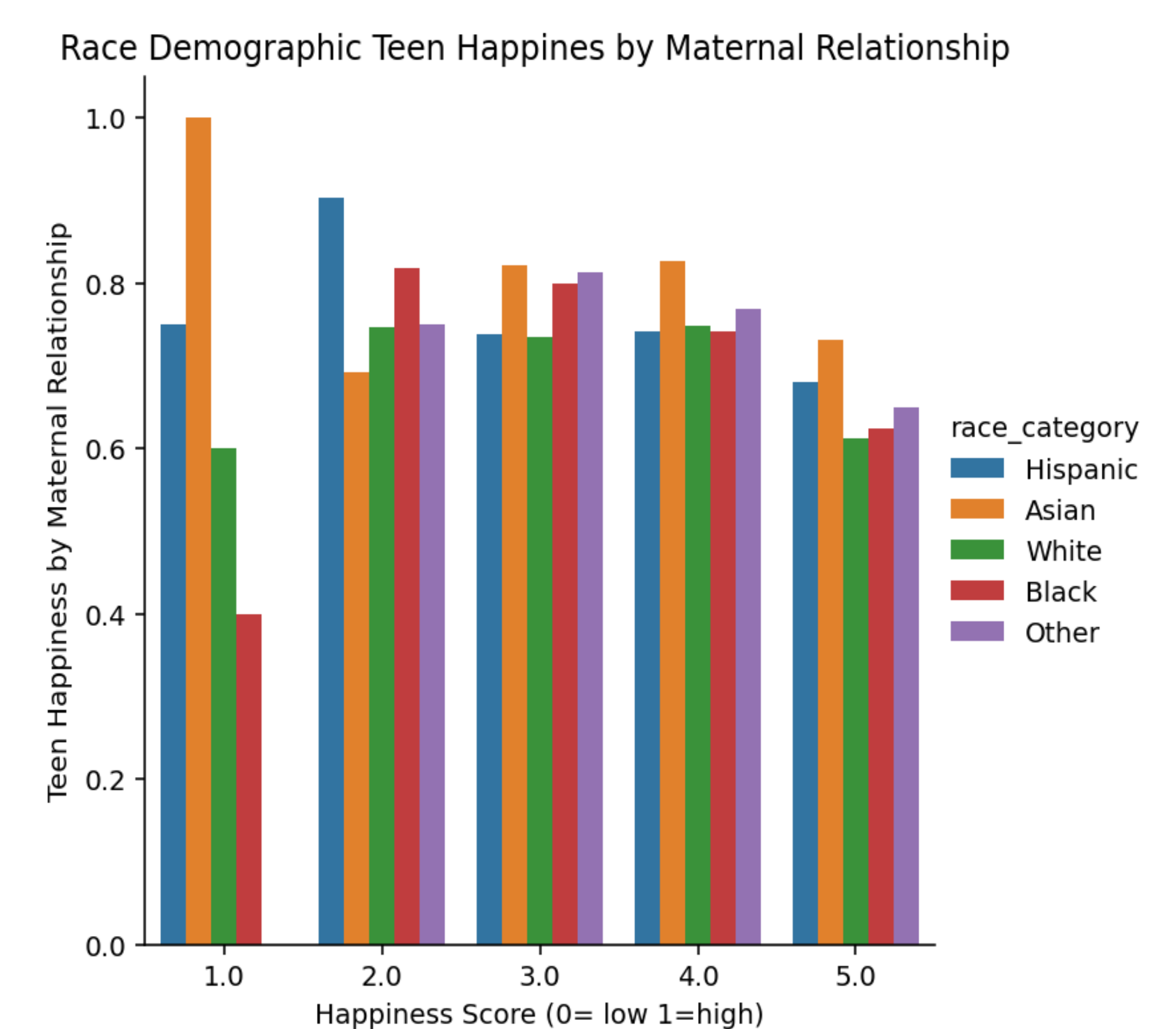
Figure 2. Happiness Binary in relation to Adults paternal relationships



### Multivariate

- A multivariate logistic regression visually confirms that Asian respondents are the only group significantly higher than Whites in predicted high happiness (OR = 1.68,  $p = .003$ ). Predicted values for White respondents are also relatively high because they make up the largest racial group in both Wave 1 and Wave 5, giving them more weight and stability in the model's estimates. Only the association between maternal was graphed because mothers had a stronger association to happiness for teens.
- Adult respondents were not included graphic analysis because their regression association was not significant.

Figure 3. Race in association with teen happiness by maternal relationship (only Asian respondent significance)



## Discussion

- For adolescents, maternal closeness showed a stronger association with happiness, as indicated by a more significant  $p\text{-value}$ . In adulthood, paternal closeness demonstrated a stronger association.
- Multivariate analyses revealed that parental closeness accounted for more variation in happiness than race, suggesting that relationship quality, rather than demographic factors (except for Asian teens) primarily drives happiness outcomes.
- These findings underscore the importance of family relation dynamics as key contributors to emotional well-being across the lifespan.
- Further research is needed explore why maternal closeness appears consistently more influential and how social, cultural, and developmental factors shape both parent and adult-child emotional bonds.