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Black and White Young Adults' Support to Midlife Parents

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Abstract

Objectives: Prior research suggests that midlife adults in Black and non-Hispanic White families differ in support patterns to aging parents. It is unclear whether such racial differences exist in young adulthood. We examined Black and White young adults' support to their midlife parents and underlying mechanisms to explain within-racial group, family-level differences.

Method: Young adults (aged 18–30; Black $n = 107$ and White $n = 351$) from the *Family Exchanges Study 2* reported how often they provided tangible (practical) and intangible (emotional support and advice) support to each parent. Participants also reported beliefs about obligation to support parents, rewards from helping, and parental needs.

Results: On average, Black young adults provided more tangible and intangible support than White young adults. Feelings of reward predicted why young adults in some Black and White families gave more support than those in other families. Parental needs explained tangible support in Black families and intangible support in White families. Within families, rewards and parental needs drove Black offspring to give more intangible support than their siblings, while obligation motivated White offspring.

Discussion: Consistent with support patterns evident in older adulthood, Black young adults gave more tangible and intangible support to their midlife parents compared to White young adults. Within-race support patterns were explained by different factors informed by the Multidimensional Intergenerational Support Model. Findings suggest psychological factors contribute to between- and within-racial patterns of exchanges.

Keywords: Family, Intergenerational relations, Racial differences

Black midlife adult children provide more support to aging parents than their non-Hispanic White counterparts (Fabius et al., 2020; Fingerman et al., 2011; Suito et al., 2007). We asked whether these racial differences are evident in young adulthood, when support to parents is generally limited (Cheng et al., 2015). Rising viewpoints also stress the importance of understanding within-racial group

heterogeneity, including family-level interactions (Kim et al., 2016). Correspondingly, this study assessed Black and White young adults' support to parents and examined factors differentiating support between families and within families among siblings.

We utilized the Multidimensional Intergenerational Support Model (MISM; Fingerman et al., 2013), which

considers multiple types of family support (e.g., practical, emotional, advice) and elucidates psychological factors (e.g., emotions, beliefs) and needs underlying support. MISM builds on theories of family support, including solidarity theory, which suggests support occurs within positive relationships (Fingerman et al., 2013), and contingency theory, which posits recipient needs motivate support (Cheng et al., 2015), and considers beliefs about support, such as obligation. Guided by this model, this study contributes to the literature by (a) examining tangible and intangible everyday support young adults provide to midlife parents; (b) considering within-racial group heterogeneity within and between families; and (c) examining theoretically driven reasons underlying support, including perceived obligation to give, rewards from giving, and parent needs.

Prior research on midlife adults presents mixed findings regarding racial differences in midlife adults' tangible and intangible support to parents. Swartz (2009) reported more emotional support exchanges in White families, and more practical support in Black families. However, Spitze and colleagues (2012) reported Black grown children were more likely to provide socioemotional support to parents than White grown children. Therefore, this study asked whether Black young adults provide more tangible and intangible support than their White counterparts.

Further, different factors may be associated with support from young adults in Black and White families. This study explored factors underlying within-racial group heterogeneity. We examined between-family differences in each race by asking why young adults in some families give more, on average, than young adults in other families. Additionally, we investigated within-family differences, asking why some adult children give more or less support than their siblings. We considered the following reasons.

Psychological Factors

Filial obligation may underlie family support (Fingerman et al., 2011; Silverstein et al., 2006). Midlife Black adults typically espouse greater obligation to provide tangible support to aging parents than do White midlife adults (Burr & Mutchler, 1999; Fingerman et al., 2011). Tangible support is usually limited in young adulthood, yet may be motivated by obligation (Cheng et al., 2013).

Helping family may elicit a sense of reward (Huo et al., 2019). However, some young adults may find helping parents stressful as they manage early adulthood demands (e.g., launching careers). Research finds that Black midlife adults experience greater rewards and less distress when helping aging parents (Burr & Mutchler, 1999; Fingerman et al., 2011). Such feelings of rewards from giving may reflect emotional closeness (Spitze et al., 2012) and inspire young adults to provide socioemotional support.

Perceived Parent Needs

Young adults may provide support in response to parent needs and crises (Hwang et al., 2018). Black young adults may be moved to provide tangible and intangible support to their parents who experience poorer health, life problems, and historically possess fewer resources than White midlife parents (Swartz, 2009). White young adults typically offer less support to parents, and only in response to parental needs.

We included individual and family characteristics as covariates that could potentially confound associations between key predictors and support exchanges. Women are typically more involved in support (Fingerman et al., 2020). Support patterns shift with age (Davey et al., 2004). Education, employment, student status, and health may drive Black–White disparities in intergenerational support (Hardie & Seltzer, 2016). Additionally, whether young adults have children may influence support. Parental marriage may affect parent–child support patterns (Swartz, 2009). Finally, we adjusted for parent coresidence because geographic proximity encourages support exchanges (Davey et al., 2004).

Method

Sample

Participants were from the *Family Exchanges Study 2* (FES-2; Fingerman, 2013). In 2008, FES-1 recruited midlife adults (aged 40–60) with at least one living parent and adult child (aged 18+) in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Statistical Area via listed samples and random-digit dialing. High-density minority areas and lower socioeconomic households were oversampled. In 2013, original participants and family members (including those who had not participated in FES-1) were contacted. In total, 740 adult children from 412 families completed FES-2.

Of this sample, 470 individuals (aged 18–30) selected their racial category as either Black or African American, or non-Hispanic ethnicity and White. We excluded 12 individuals missing information on key variables. The analytic sample included 458 individuals from 303 families, 23% were Black ($n = 107$; 42 males and 65 females) and 77% were non-Hispanic White ($n = 351$; 166 males and 185 females).

Measures

Tangible and intangible support

The Intergenerational Support Scale (ISS; Fingerman et al., 2009) assessed frequency of tangible and intangible support to parents, ranging from 1 (*less than once a year or never*) to 8 (*daily*). Tangible support to each parent was determined with one item on practical support (e.g., errands, chores). Intangible support was assessed with two items

on emotional support and giving advice (father $\rho = .82$, mother $\rho = .83$; Eisinga et al., 2013).

Rewards and beliefs

Participants rated how rewarding it was to help each parent from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*); we used average reward score across both parents.

Using adapted measure of young adults' obligation to help parents (Silverstein et al., 2006), participants rated how often they believed adults should help parents with six types of support in the ISS, from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The six items were averaged to create a filial obligation score ($\alpha = .79$).

Perceived parent needs

The Life Problems Scales (Birditt et al., 2010) assessed participant perceptions of whether each parent experienced seven types of problems in the past 2 years (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*): health problem or injury, emotional/psychological problem, drug/drinking or financial problems, death of someone they felt close to, victim of crime, and divorce/relationship problems. We averaged the number of problems across both parents.

Respondents indicated perceived physical health of each parent from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*; Idler & Kasl, 1991). We reverse-coded and averaged health across both parents to create parents' health scores (higher scores indicated worse health).

Covariates

Covariates included young adults' age, gender (1 = *female*, 0 = *male*), years of education, full-time employment status (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), student status (1 = *full-time/part-time*, 0 = *not student*), marital status (1 = *married/cohabiting*, 0 = *not married*), coresidence with one or both parents (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), has children (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), and self-rated health from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). We also included parent marital status (1 = *married to each other*, 0 = *not married to each other*).

Analytic Strategy

To examine mean differences between racial groups for tangible and intangible support, we estimated two-level linear models with young adults (*level 1*) nested within families (*level 2*). Tangible and intangible support were tested separately as outcomes.

We estimated models stratified by race to examine how Black and White young adults' obligation, rewards from giving, and parent needs predicted support to parents. To assess between-family differences, we compared aggregate scores of obligation, rewards, and parent needs among siblings in the same family to corresponding scores in other families of the same race. Within-family differences were gleaned by comparing siblings' scores within the same

family. Thus, all variables were recoded to their (a) family-mean and (b) deviation from family-mean for each individual (Hamaker & Muthén, 2020). The family-mean (*level 2*; between-family differences) compared families experiencing greater rewards from giving to families experiencing less reward. Deviation from the family-mean (*level 1*; within-family differences) compared an individual with more rewards to their siblings. All models adjusted for the same covariates using STATA.

Results

Black participants had fewer years of education, were more likely to have children, and less likely to be employed or have parents married to each other than White young adults (Supplementary Table 1). Black participants also reported more filial obligation, and were more likely to report having parents in poorer health and with more problems. Supplementary Table 2 displays bivariate correlations between outcomes.

Black and White Young Adults' Tangible and Intangible Support to Parents

We estimated multilevel models to investigate between-racial group differences in tangible and intangible support. Compared to White young adults, Black young adults provided more tangible support ($b = 0.53, p = .004$) and intangible support ($b = 0.55, p = .004$).

Next, in models stratified by race, we decomposed variables into between-family and within-family components to investigate how obligation, rewards, and parent needs are associated with young adults' support to parents across and within families in each racial group (Table 1). Adult children in Black families with greater senses of rewards gave more frequent tangible and intangible support to parents than those in families with less rewards on average (Models 2A and 2B). Poorer perceived parent health among adult children within Black families predicted more frequent tangible support to parents than families with better perceived parent health. For Black participants, there were two within-family effects. Black participants with higher senses of rewards gave more frequent intangible support to parents than siblings with lower senses of rewards. Additionally, a Black individual perceiving more parent problems than siblings gave more frequent intangible support to parents.

Adult children in White families with higher sense of rewards reported giving more frequent tangible and intangible support to parents than those in families with fewer rewards, on average (Models 2C and 2D). In White families, more filial obligation and parent problems predicted more frequent intangible support. One within-family effect emerged for White families. White participants with more filial obligation gave more frequent intangible support to parents than siblings with less obligation.

Table 1. Within–Between Random Effects Model for Young Adults’ Tangible and Intangible Support to Midlife Parents by Race

Variables	Black young adults				White young adults			
	Model 2A: tangible support ^a		Model 2B: intangible support ^b		Model 2C: tangible support ^a		Model 2D: intangible support ^b	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Fixed effects								
Intercept	5.18***	0.87	4.75***	0.84	4.15***	0.48	3.09***	0.51
Between-family: beliefs and rewards								
Filial obligation ^c	0.42	0.34	0.40	0.33	0.19	0.18	0.75***	0.19
Rewards of giving support ^d	0.55*	0.22	0.67**	0.21	0.24*	0.12	0.31*	0.12
Between-family: parent needs								
Parent health ^e	0.51*	0.22	-0.02	0.22	0.08	0.11	0.01	0.11
Parent problems ^f	-0.29	0.19	-0.04	0.19	0.04	0.09	0.22*	0.10
Within-family: beliefs and rewards								
Filial obligation	-0.48	0.69	-0.11	0.57	0.48	0.29	0.72**	0.25
Rewards of giving support	0.67	0.52	1.28**	0.44	0.21	0.18	0.18	0.16
Within-family: parent needs								
Parent health	-0.16	0.65	-0.93	0.54	-0.21	0.22	0.04	0.20
Parent problems	0.15	0.40	0.85*	0.34	0.28	0.18	0.09	0.16
Between-family: covariates								
Female	-0.53	0.44	0.22	0.42	0.33	0.19	0.72***	0.20
Age	-0.19**	0.06	-0.10	0.06	-0.03	0.04	-0.05	0.04
Years of education	0.03	0.10	0.05	0.10	-0.18***	0.05	0.04	0.05
Employed ^g	-1.04*	0.45	0.01	0.43	-0.20	0.21	0.02	0.22
Student ^h	-0.04	0.40	-0.05	0.38	-0.50*	0.24	-0.25	0.25
Married ⁱ	-0.37	0.65	-0.01	0.63	-0.32	0.27	-0.15	0.28
Has kids	0.56	0.49	0.36	0.48	0.03	0.31	0.49	0.32
Self-rated health ^j	0.23	0.19	-0.01	0.19	0.11	0.09	0.22*	0.09
Parents currently married	0.86*	0.36	0.00	0.35	0.54**	0.19	0.08	0.21
Coresidence ^k	0.55	0.45	0.69	0.43	1.84***	0.21	0.99***	0.22
Within-family: covariates								
Female	-0.44	0.93	0.08	0.77	-0.19	0.24	0.18	0.21
Age	-0.40**	0.15	-0.20	0.12	-0.04	0.05	-0.01	0.05
Years of education	0.61**	0.23	0.19	0.19	0.00	0.09	0.08	0.08
Employed	0.48	0.75	0.30	0.63	0.03	0.31	-0.23	0.27
Student	-1.16	0.75	-0.93	0.63	-0.13	0.28	-0.33	0.25
Married	0.04	0.93	-0.70	0.77	-0.71	0.39	-0.06	0.34
Has kids	1.95	1.02	2.07*	0.85	-0.00	0.43	-0.18	0.38
Self-rated health	-0.47	0.34	-0.42	0.29	-0.27	0.14	-0.22	0.12
Parents currently married	-1.00	1.41	-0.68	1.17	-0.93	0.77	-1.27	0.68
Coresidence	-0.30	0.99	-0.63	0.82	1.33***	0.29	0.82**	0.26
Random effects								
Intercept variance	0.23	0.35	0.57	0.37	0.00	0.00	0.38	0.16
Residual variance	1.97***	0.42	1.37***	0.35	1.65***	0.13	1.27***	0.16
-2 log likelihood	387.6		317.8		1171.8		1163.0	

Notes: Black young adults $n = 107$ (nested within 78 families). White young adults $n = 351$ (nested within 225 families). Between-family components compare average reports across family members to those of other families. Within-family components compare reports of an individual to those of siblings from the same family.

^aPractical support (e.g., chores, errands) rated from 1 (*less than once a year or never*) to 8 (*daily*).

^bAverage of two items (emotional support, giving advice) from 1 (*less than once a year or never*) to 8 (*daily*).

^cAverage of six items regarding how often offspring should provide six types of support to parents (emotional, advice, social, financial, practical) from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*).

^dAverage of two items regarding how rewarding it is to help each parent from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

^e1 (*poor*), 2 (*fair*), 3 (*good*), 4 (*very good*) to 5 (*excellent*).

^fAverage sum of six items associated with each parent (severe health problem or injury, emotional or psychological problem, victim of a crime, alcohol or drug problem, financial issues or unemployment, problems with the law, divorce or serious relationship problem, and widowed).

^g1 (*full-time employment*), 0 (*not employed full-time*).

^h1 (*full-time or part-time student*), 0 (*not a student*).

ⁱ1 (*married or cohabitating*), 0 (*unmarried*).

^j1 (*poor*), 2 (*fair*), 3 (*good*), 4 (*very good*) to 5 (*excellent*).

^kLiving with parents 1 (*yes*) and 0 (*no*).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

We examined Black and White young adults' support to their midlife parents and considered reasons for support differences within each racial group. Findings suggest Black young adults provide more tangible and intangible support to their midlife parents, consistent with prior research that documented Black midlife offspring give more support to late-life parents relative to White offspring. Further, Black and White young adult support to parents was explained by differentiable psychological factors (obligation and rewards from providing everyday support) and parent needs.

Reasons for Within-Racial Group Support Differences

Obligation did not predict support for Black young adults but predicted intangible support for White individuals and families. These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that young adult obligation is often associated with socioemotional support rather than practical support (Hwang et al., 2018). Further, findings may imply White, but not Black, young adults provide support as a form of duty.

Findings also revealed more frequent tangible and intangible support to parents in Black and White families where adult children, on average, found helping more rewarding than families with fewer rewards. Additionally, within Black families, siblings who reported more rewards were more likely to provide intangible support, corroborating that Black individuals provide support motivated by affection (Fingerman et al., 2011) and is consistent with literature that Black midlife adults find helping parents more rewarding than their White counterparts (Burr & Mutchler, 1999).

Perceived parent need predicted young adults' support to parents. Across Black families, poorer parent health predicted more tangible support to parents than families with better parent health, while parent crises predicted intangible support among adult children in White families. Consistent with Swartz (2009), findings suggest that Black–White differences in support-type provision may reflect socioeconomic inequalities. For example, amid crises, White families may provide emotional comfort and outsource chores while Black families perform tasks themselves. Further, Fingerman and colleagues (2011) documented that support flows upward in Black, but not White families, which may be underscored by parent needs, as our findings revealed that within Black families, siblings with more parent problems gave more frequent intangible support.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are limitations to this study. Our model did not fully explain patterns of tangible support or obligation in Black young adults. Additionally, within Black and White families, key variables did not explain why some adult children

give more tangible support than siblings. Our key predictors were only available in FES-2, which limited exploration of other potential factors underlying young adults' support to their midlife parents. Future inquiry into support reciprocity with parents (Silverstein et al., 2006) or gendered giving, which Park (2018) stressed in studying Black–White differences in parent–child financial support exchanges, may elucidate this.

Despite these limitations, this study uniquely examined family-level tangible and intangible support Black and White young adults provide to their midlife parents. In sum, Black young adults provide more support to midlife parents than White young adults, suggesting that racial differences in support observed in midlife (Fingerman et al., 2011) may also exist in young adulthood. Further, Black young adults' support appears to be motivated in the context of affection while obligation and coresidence prompt White young adults. In response to parent needs, Black young adults in families appear to pool tangible resources while White young adults offer advice and emotional support to parents.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary data are available at *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* online.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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Study data, analytic methods, and materials are available upon request. Submit requests to first/corresponding author. This study was not preregistered in an independent, institutional registry.

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