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A Social Network Comparison of Low-Income Black and White Newlywed Couples

Relative to White families, Black families have been described as relying on extended social networks to compensate for other social and economic disadvantages. The presence or absence of supportive social networks should be especially relevant to young couples entering marriage, but to date there has been little effort to describe the social networks of comparable Black and White newlyweds. The current study addressed this gap by drawing on interviews with 57 first-married newlyweds from low-income communities to compare the composition and structure of Black and White couples' duocentric social networks. The results indicated that low-income Black couples entered marriage at a social disadvantage relative to White couples, with more family

relationships but fewer positive relationships and fewer sources of emotional support (for wives), fewer connections to married individuals, and fewer shared relationships between spouses. Black couples' relative social disadvantages persisted even when various economic and demographic variables were controlled.

Black families have long been described as drawing support from their extended social networks (McAdoo, 1998 Stack, 1974 Staples & Johnson, 1993). Indeed, analyses of data from the National Survey of Black Americans indicate that 2 out of 3 Black adults treat someone to whom they are not biologically related as a relative (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994). Furthermore, ethnographic research on Black families suggests that strong expectations about mutual support continue to play a large role in these extended network ties (e.g., Hill, 1999 Roy, 2005). The cultivation of extended networks may be a source of social capital for Black families to compensate for experiences of segregation and economic hardship (Broman, 1996 Scott & Black, 1999).

To the extent that extended social networks can serve as a source of social capital for Black families, they may be especially relevant for Black married couples. On several dimensions, Black couples enter marriage at a disadvantage relative to comparable Whites. Not only

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do Black couples have less access to education and higher rates of unemployment than Whites, they are also overrepresented in lower income communities in the United States (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013), significantly less likely to get married and thus rare within Black communities (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002), and significantly more likely to have children prior to entering marriage (Elwood & Jencks, 2004). If Black couples possess the extended social networks that have been described as characteristic of Black families more generally, those networks might serve as a resource to compensate for these other social and economic disadvantages.

Yet, although research has described the social networks of Black *families*, research directly comparing the networks of Black and White *couples* has been rare. Moreover, the limited existing literature has relied almost exclusively on global perceptions of network quality, preventing detailed statements of how the composition and structure of Black couples' social networks may differ from those of comparable White couples. Recognition of this gap has instigated a call for further research describing the social networks of disadvantaged populations (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002) and of Black couples in particular (Brown, Orbuch, & Maharaj, 2010; Bryant et al., 2010). In the current study we aimed to fill this gap in the literature by using newly developed techniques of social network analysis (i.e., studying couples' combined duocentric social networks; Kennedy, Jackson, Bradbury, Green, & Karney, 2014) to compare the networks of recently married Black and White couples sampled from low-income communities.

DIFFERENCES IN THE COMPOSITION OF BLACK AND WHITE COUPLES' SOCIAL NETWORKS

The *composition of a social network* refers to the aggregated characteristics of the individuals who compose the network. Qualitative and quantitative research suggests at least two ways that the composition of Black and White couples' social networks may differ.

First, Black and White couples may differ in the amount of emotional and financial support they can access from their networks. Several studies have shown that Blacks generally describe smaller networks of close relationships than comparable Whites but, within

their networks, Blacks generally describe a higher proportion of family members (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Janevic, 2001). In light of the fact that people are more likely to draw social support from family members than from friends or coworkers (Wellman & Wortley, 1990), these trends suggest that low-income Black couples may possess stronger networks of support (both emotional and financial) than comparable White couples, consistent with the idea that social networks may partly compensate for economic disadvantages in Black communities (Broman, 1996; McAdoo, 1998). Research on couples in established marriages, however, has found that Black couples actually report receiving less family support than White couples (Rhodes, Ebert, & Meyers, 1994; Timmer, Veroff, & Hatchett, 1996). One reason may be that Black couples are often expected to provide support to their network members rather than receive it. Indeed, even Black couples in satisfying, established relationships describe the demands of their extended networks as a leading source of stress (Marks et al., 2008). For Black newlyweds, therefore, network relationships may not provide the financial and emotional assistance that helps sustain White couples (Neighbors, 1997) and instead may act as yet another disadvantage Black couples face.

Second, to the extent that rates of marriage are lower and rates of divorce are higher among Blacks than among Whites (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002), Black couples' networks may contain fewer models of successful marriage than White couples' networks. The transmission of expectations through a network has been invoked to account for marital outcomes in disadvantaged communities, where the presence of married couples in a couple's network may convey the idea that "family stability is the norm, not the exception" (Wilson, 1987, p. 56). Longitudinal data support this perspective, showing that the greater the proportion of married people in spouses' networks and the fewer network members who are divorced, the greater the longevity of a couple's marriage, even after controlling for potential confounds such as income and education (Booth, Edwards, & Johnson, 1991; McDermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009). If the networks of recently married Black couples contain fewer married individuals and more divorced individuals, then they may have less exposure to examples of successful long-term relationships.

1 DIFFERENCES IN THE STRUCTURE OF BLACK
2 AND WHITE COUPLES' NETWORKS

3 The *structure of a social network* refers to
4 the arrangement of relationships among net-
5 work members, independent of the characteris-
6 tics of those individuals. Structural features of
7 social networks have been studied less often than
8 compositional features, but there are reasons to
9 predict that the structure of Black and White
10 couples' social networks may differ as well.

11 First, Black and White couples may differ
12 in the density of their networks, that is, the
13 proportion of network members with relation-
14 ships to one another. Because Black families are
15 more likely to have been disrupted by divorce
16 or to have experienced multiple partner fertility
17 (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002), gaps left by a lack
18 of married familial ties may be filled with friends
19 and coworkers who do not know one another.
20 As a consequence, the networks of Black cou-
21 ples may have fewer interconnections than the
22 networks of White couples (Harknett & Knab,
23 2007). To the extent that networks with more
24 connections are more efficient at transferring
25 information and resources throughout the net-
26 work (Centola, 2010), lower density networks
27 with fewer connections would represent an addi-
28 tional impediment to garnering needed support
29 for Black couples.

30 Second, Black and White partners may differ
31 in the degree to which their spouses are con-
32 nected to other people within their networks,
33 a structural feature referred to as *centrality*
34 (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Spouse centrality
35 may contribute to marital outcomes in two
36 ways. First, a spouse with high centrality (i.e.,
37 connected to many individuals in the partner's
38 network) can coordinate and draw on other
39 network members who otherwise would have
40 no contact with each other, facilitating the
41 transfer of information and resources when
42 they are needed. Second, a well-connected
43 spouse may reflect partners who have inte-
44 grated their spouses within their own networks.
45 Ties between one's spouse and other networks
46 members may represent a barrier to ending
47 the marriage, because leaving the spouse may
48 threaten other valued relationships as well.
49 Prior research in this area has not assessed
50 spouse centrality directly, but research from the
51 Early Years of Marriage Project has shown that
52 Black spouses do report feeling less close to
53 each other's families (Orbuch, Bauermeister, &
54 Brown, 2008), suggesting that Black spouses

may be less well integrated into each other's
networks than White spouses.

4 DIFFERENCES IN BLACK AND WHITE COUPLES'
5 DUOCENTRIC NETWORKS

6 To date, comparisons of the social networks of
7 Black and White couples have focused exclu-
8 sively on networks surrounding individuals,
9 known as *egocentric networks*. Collecting data
10 from couples, however, provides an opportunity
11 to describe the combined networks of two peo-
12 ple, known as *duocentric networks* (Coromina,
13 Guia, Coenders, & Ferligoj, 2008; Kennedy
14 et al., 2014). With respect to understanding
15 marriages, an advantage of assessing duocentric
16 networks is the ability to estimate *overlap*,
17 that is, the number of individuals appearing
18 in both spouses' networks. Greater overlap
19 within the duocentric network may promote
20 marriages through direct pressure to remain
21 together exerted by individuals close to both
22 partners (Sprecher, 2011) or through shared
23 social investments that constrain partners from
24 leaving the marriage. Indeed, couples who per-
25 ceive more shared ties are more satisfied with
26 their relationships cross-sectionally (e.g., Julien,
27 Chartrand, & Begin, 1999; Stein, Bush, Ross,
28 & Ward, 1992) and describe more satisfying
29 and lasting relationships longitudinally (e.g.,
30 Burger & Milardo, 1995; Kearns & Leonard,
31 2004). Given that Black spouses feel less close
32 to each other's families than White spouses,
33 Black couples may include fewer of each other's
34 family members among their shared ties and
35 thus have less overlap overall as compared
36 to White couples. Prior comparisons of the
37 networks of Black and White couples in estab-
38 lished relationships have not assessed actual
39 duocentric overlap directly, instead relying on
40 global perceptions of overlap that can be biased
41 by perceptions of relationship satisfaction and
42 do not correlate perfectly between partners.

44 A second advantage of duocentric network
45 assessments is the opportunity they provide to
46 describe the characteristics of spouses' shared
47 network members. Black couples' overlap may
48 not only be smaller than that of White couples
49 but also, to the extent that Black spouses gen-
50 erally feel less close to their spouses' family
51 than White couples do (Orbuch et al., 2008), less
52 likely to include family members as well. In
53 addition, when couples do share ties to the same
54 individuals, they may not agree on the quality of

1 those relationships. A higher proportion of dis-
 2 cordant relationships—that is, when one partner
 3 reports a positive relationship with an individ-
 4 ual and the other reports a neutral or negative
 5 relationship with that individual—may be a risk
 6 factor for couples that research on their social
 7 networks has yet to examine.

10 LIMITATIONS OF PRIOR RESEARCH

11 Whereas ethnographic research suggests that
 12 strong social network ties may be a characteristic
 13 strength of Black families (Hill, 1999; McAdoo,
 14 1998), prior studies describing social networks
 15 among Blacks and Whites suggest that Black
 16 couples may enter their marriages at a social
 17 disadvantage relative to White couples (Lawson
 18 & Thompson, 1994). The existing literature
 19 cannot resolve these two competing perspec-
 20 tives because of several limitations of prior
 21 research. First, prior investigations of social
 22 networks have relied exclusively on spouses'
 23 own global perceptions of the composition
 24 of their networks, preventing descriptions of
 25 structural features, such as density and overlap,
 26 that may be independently informative (Allan,
 27 2006). Second, the few studies that have asked
 28 partners to list specific network members gen-
 29 erally restrict their lists to between five and 11
 30 individuals. Lists of this size produce unreliable
 31 estimates of structure (Golinelli et al., 2010) and
 32 are unlikely to get beyond family members and
 33 closest friends, thus ignoring the peripheral
 34 and weaker ties (i.e., casual relationships with
 35 neighbors or coworkers) that some suggest are
 36 especially important for connecting individ-
 37 uals with new opportunities and information
 38 (Marsden, 2005).

39 Third, comparisons of Black and White
 40 social networks have generally collected Black
 41 and White samples from different communities
 42 and have neglected to control for economic and
 43 demographic differences between Black and
 44 White couples. Compared to White couples,
 45 Black couples typically marry later (Landale
 46 & Oropesa, 2007), are more likely to have
 47 children prior to entering marriage (Elwood
 48 & Jencks, 2004), and report lower incomes
 49 (Fronczek, 2005). Each of these differences has
 50 implications for social networks. For example,
 51 as individuals age they generally focus more
 52 on a smaller group of closer ties within their
 53 networks, devoting less attention to peripheral
 54 contacts (Ajrouch et al., 2001; Carstensen,

1992). As couples transition into parenthood,
 they tend to increase contact with family, request
 more support from them, and have less con-
 tact with friends (Bost, Cox, & Payne, 2002).
 Finally, individuals of lower socioeconomic
 status often have less access to resources in
 their network, affecting the types of support
 exchanges in which they can engage (Gallo,
 Bogart, Vranceanu, & Matthews, 2005). With-
 out analyses that control for these variables
 directly it is impossible to determine whether
 potential differences in the social networks
 of Black and White couples are correlates of
 these demographic and economic differences
 between Black and White couples, or differences
 independently associated with race.

18 OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STUDY

19 To date, research devoted to understanding per-
 20 sistent racial disparities in marital outcomes has
 21 emphasized the relative economic disadvantage
 22 of Black couples. The goal of the current study
 23 was to evaluate whether Black couples begin
 24 their marriages with relative social disadvan-
 25 tages as well, as observed in the composition
 26 and structure of their social networks. Toward
 27 that end, we examined data from extensive
 28 social network interviews conducted with Black
 29 and White first-married newlywed couples sam-
 30 pled from low-income communities. Because
 31 low-income communities are where racial dis-
 32 parities in marital outcomes are most persistent,
 33 low-income couples comprise a particularly
 34 appropriate sample in which to investigate
 35 these issues. Restricting attention to newlyweds
 36 ensures that all couples are at a similar stage
 37 of their marriage and that the most vulnerable
 38 couples have not yet left the population through
 39 divorce. Because intermarriages (i.e., those
 40 including individuals from different racial or
 41 ethnic backgrounds) face unique challenges
 42 (e.g., Karis, 2003; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan,
 43 1990; Usita & Poulsen, 2003), they were not
 44 included in this study.

45 On the basis of prior research, we predicted
 46 that the composition and structure of Black cou-
 47 ples' social networks would reflect less social
 48 capital than the networks of comparable White
 49 couples; that is, we expected Black couples to
 50 describe networks containing fewer sources of
 51 support, fewer married individuals, and more
 52 divorced individuals than the networks described
 53 by White couples. Moreover, we expected Black
 54

1 couples' networks to demonstrate lower spouse
 2 centrality and less overlap and for there to be
 3 fewer positive relationships among the overlap-
 4 ping network members. We made no predictions
 5 about whether observed differences in social net-
 6 work features would be reduced or eliminated
 7 after controlling for economic and demographic
 8 differences between Black and White couples.

10
 11 METHOD

12 Sampling

13 Newlywed couples were identified via mar-
 14 riage license records obtained from the Los
 15 Angeles County Recorder's Office between
 16 2009 and 2010 as part of a larger study on
 17 newlywed development among couples living in
 18 low-income communities. Using zip codes from
 19 marriage license databases, recently married
 20 couples' addresses were matched with census
 21 data to identify those living in low-income
 22 communities. Low-income neighborhoods were
 23 identified as those with a median household
 24 income of no more than 160% of the federal
 25 poverty level for a four-person family. A sim-
 26 ilar method was used previously (Bramlett &
 27 Mosher, 2002) and is known to be more reliable
 28 than asking participants their income, given
 29 that individuals can be reluctant to disclose this
 30 information.

31 Names on the marriage licenses were pro-
 32 cessed using a Bayesian Census Surname
 33 Combination developed by researchers at the
 34 RAND Corporation (Elliott et al., 2013). This
 35 algorithm integrates census and surname infor-
 36 mation to produce a multinomial likelihood
 37 of each individual falling within one of four
 38 racial categories: Black, Hispanic, Asian, and
 39 White/Other. Couples identified as having a
 40 high probability of being Black or White were
 41 contacted for recruitment into a longitudinal
 42 study. Follow-up phone calls were made, and
 43 those who were eligible and provided consent
 44 were included in the study. The seven eligi-
 45 bility criterion included the following: (a) first
 46 marriage for each partner, (b) married less than
 47 3 months at the time of screening, (c) spoke
 48 fluent English (but do not need to be literate,
 49 because data were collected in person or via the
 50 telephone), (d) living together (i.e., the couple
 51 could not be temporarily separated, nor could
 52 either partner be deployed or incarcerated), (e)
 53 were above 18, (f) wives were below 40 years of

1 age (to allow for the transition to parenthood for
 2 all couples), and (g) both spouses self-identified
 3 as either non-Hispanic Black or non-Hispanic
 4 White.

5
 6 Participants

7 Using these eligibility criteria, 71 Black cou-
 8 ples and 66 White couples were screened as eli-
 9 gible for the study and agreed to participate.
 10 Of these, 51 Black (72%) and 50 White (76%)
 11 couples were successfully scheduled and com-
 12 pleted the baseline interviews. Nine months after
 13 the baseline assessment, 86% of participating
 14 couples ($n=87$ couples) completed the Time
 15 2 interview. The social network interview was
 16 completed by 70% of those who successfully
 17 completed a Time 2 assessment, which yielded
 18 30 duocentric White couples' networks, 27 du-
 19 centric Black couples' networks, and networks
 20 from two additional wives (not analyzed here).
 21 Couples who completed the social network inter-
 22 views ($n=57$) did not differ significantly from
 23 those who did not ($n=44$) in age, average house-
 24 hold income reported at baseline, parental status,
 25 or baseline measures of relationship satisfaction.
 26 There were also no differences in retention rates
 27 across Black and White couples.

28 Across the 57 couples who provided com-
 29 plete network interviews, the mean length of
 30 marriage at baseline was 4.9 months ($SD=2.3$).
 31 Men's mean age was 29.8 years ($SD=6.0$), and
 32 women's mean age was 28.0 years ($SD=4.3$).
 33 However, there were significant differences
 34 in age by race, such that Black husbands
 35 ($M=28.2$) and wives ($M=26.6$) were younger
 36 than White husbands ($M=31.3$) and wives
 37 ($M=29.2$; for husbands: $t[55]=2.0, p=.06$;
 38 for wives: $t[55]=2.4, p=.02$). Wives and hus-
 39 bands self-reported joint household income
 40 averaged about \$61,000 ($SD=\$30,000$), but
 41 again this varied significantly by race, such that
 42 Black couples ($M=\$42,000, SD=\$25,000$)
 43 made an average income nearly half that of the
 44 White couples ($M=\$78,000, SD=\$22,000$),
 45 $t(53)=5.7, p<.001$, despite being sampled
 46 from similarly low-income neighborhoods. Cou-
 47 ples had a mean of 0.51 children ($SD=0.67$),
 48 with 28 couples having at least one child in the
 49 household (6.7% of White couples and 44.4%
 50 of Black couples). These three significant demo-
 51 graphic differences between Black and White
 52 couples—age, income, and the presence of
 53 children in their household—were treated as
 54 covariates in the analyses described below.

Procedure

At baseline, couples were visited in their homes by two trained interviewers who described the institutional review board–approved study and obtained consent from each participant. Demographic information was collected in the interviews at this time. Nine months later, couples completed a second interview assessment and were asked to schedule a separate social network interview within the following 2 weeks. At that time, two interviewers arrived at the couple's residence and conducted the network interview separately with each spouse. At the end of each phase of assessment, couples were debriefed and compensated in cash for their time.

Measures

Demographic information. Demographic data were collected at the baseline interview. Each participant's date of birth, date of marriage, household income, and whether the couple had any children were all collected at this time. Age and marital length at the baseline interview were calculated from the self-reported birth date and marriage date. To measure household income, husbands and wives were independently asked "Thinking about your income and the income of everyone else in your household, what was your total household income from all sources before taxes in the past 12 months?" Husbands' and wives' reports correlated highly ($r = .89$) and thus were averaged to yield a couple-level household income variable. To assess the presence of children, husbands' and wives were independently asked, "Who lives in your current household (besides the two of you)?" with one of the response options being "your (or your spouse's) children (include biological, adopted, step, and foster children)." If either the husband or wife reported the presence of children in the home, the couple was given a dummy code of 1 for "children present" or 0 for "no children present" (disagreement between couple reports occurred in three of the 57 cases; these couples were coded as having children).

The social network interview. To assess egocentric networks, spouses were each asked to list and describe 40 members of their social network (i.e., *alters*) and to describe the relationship between every possible dyad combination among the network members. This

number of alters gave respondents ample opportunity to report about both close and peripheral ties. Spouses were interviewed separately, and interviews averaged 95 minutes in duration.

Specific instructions for naming the network members were as follows:

To get started, I'd like for you to name 40 people that you know and who know you. Here's the kind of person we are hoping you will name: first, they have to be adults, aged 18 years old or older—do not give me the names of children under age 18; second, these should be people you have had contact with sometime during the past year or so—either face to face, by phone, mail, or email; third, these do not have to be people you like, just people you know and who know you. Let's start by naming your spouse, and after that you can name any adults you know no matter who they are or where they live. Please give us their first and last names. Remember, all of the information you give us is confidential.

For each of the alters they named, spouses were asked to report the gender (man or woman as response options), ethnicity (White, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian or Other as response options), current marital status (yes/no), history of divorce (yes/no), parental status (yes/no), employment (yes/no), and financial status (doing well/getting by/struggling as response options). In addition, participants categorized their relationship with each alter (i.e., family member, friend, coworker) and rated the quality of that relationship (0 = "bad," 1 = "neutral," and 2 = "good"), whether they could turn to that alter for emotional support or tangible support (i.e., money, transportation, food), as well as whether that alter would turn to them for emotional or tangible support, each responded to in a yes/no format. Using this information, we described network composition by adding the number of alters across the network fitting that category, that is, *the number of good relationships* in the network (i.e., those not identified as either neutral or negative). Participants were allowed to skip any questions they preferred not to answer or to which they did not know the answer. Social network composition data were missing in about 5% of cases; for each analysis, all available data were analyzed.

After describing the composition of the network, the following instructions prompted spouses to describe the structure of their networks:

1 Going back to the list of 40 people that you men-
 2 tioned earlier, I am going to ask you about pairs
 3 of these people and whether they have had contact
 4 with each other sometime during the past year or
 5 so—either face to face, by phone, or e-mail. For
 6 each pair, I want to know if the two people have
 7 had any contact.

8 This part of the interview allowed us to assess
 9 the structural variables of interest to the indi-
 10 vidual networks: density and spouse network
 11 centrality. *Density* was calculated as the num-
 12 ber of network members with relationships to
 13 one another over the total possible number of
 14 relationships; thus, scores ranged from 0 to 1.
 15 *Spouse network centrality* was calculated using
 16 *spouse degree*, which is the number of ties
 17 spouses reported their partners had within their
 18 individual network.

19 In addition to looking at the composition and
 20 structure of husbands' and wives' individual net-
 21 works, combining their individual information
 22 into a merged network allowed us to examine
 23 unique duocentric network features of interest.
 24 Shared ties across both spouses were identified
 25 by matching the first and last names of the alters
 26 reported by each spouse, and these were con-
 27 firmed by ensuring that shared ties had comple-
 28 mentary roles across spouses (e.g., my family
 29 as reported by the wife, and my spouse's fam-
 30 ily as reported by the husband). The number of
 31 shared ties that both husbands and wives inde-
 32 pendently include in their individual networks
 33 was treated as an estimate of *overlap*. In this
 34 overlapping region of the duocentric network,
 35 we examined the composition (e.g., family vs.
 36 friends) as well as the proportion of discordant
 37 relationships (i.e., whether a particular alter has
 38 a similar quality relationship to both the husband
 39 and wife or whether this relationship is negative
 40 or neutral for one and positive for the other).

41
 42 *Analysis Strategy*

43 We estimated social network features for each
 44 couple using the *igraph* package of the R plat-
 45 form separately for husbands and wives (Csárdi
 46 & Nepusz, 2006). Analyses testing for whether
 47 demographic differences between Black and
 48 White couples accounted for racial disparities
 49 included a dummy variable for race (1 = Black,
 50 0 = White), a dummy variable for parental status
 51 (1 = children, 0 = no children), age (centered
 52 and, in the duocentric analyses, averaged across
 53 husbands and wives), and household income

(centered). To compare the social networks of
 Black and White couples, we ran stepwise mul-
 tiple regression models predicting each network
 feature from race in the first step and race plus
 the proximal demographic differences between
 Black and White couples—age, parental status,
 and household income—in the second step.
 This allowed us to look for the predicted racial
 differences consistent with prior literature on
 Black families and then to determine whether
 any observed differences were reduced or
 eliminated after controlling for demographic
 differences between Black and White couples.

14
 15 RESULTS

16 *Preliminary Analyses*

17 Correlations among the features of husbands'
 18 and wives' networks are presented in Table 1.
 19 Patterns of correlation among the social network
 20 variables were similar for husbands and wives,
 21 although correlations were often weaker and less
 22 frequently significant for husbands than wives.
 23 Among compositional features, the number of
 24 alters needing emotional and tangible support
 25 was significantly positively associated with the
 26 number of alters providing tangible and emo-
 27 tional support for both spouses. For wives, the
 28 provision and receipt of both forms of support
 29 were also significantly positively associated with
 30 the number of good quality relationships and
 31 the number of married individuals in the net-
 32 work. For husbands, associations between sup-
 33 port exchange and the quality and composition
 34 of the network were weaker but were generally
 35 in the same directions. With respect to the struc-
 36 ture of husbands' and wives' social networks,
 37 the density of wives' networks was significantly
 38 positively associated with all forms of support
 39 exchange, and wives' report of spouse degree
 40 was significantly positively associated with the
 41 number of alters needing emotional or tangi-
 42 ble support. For husbands, these associations
 43 were weaker and less frequently significant, but
 44 in the same direction. Features of husbands'
 45 and wives' networks were significantly posi-
 46 tively correlated between partners for only two
 47 of the 11 characteristics assessed: (a) number of
 48 own family members and (b) number of married
 49 alters.

50 With respect to the features of the combined
 51 duocentric networks, the number of overlap-
 52 ping alters was significantly negatively associ-
 53 ated with the proportion of family members in
 54

Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations of Compositional (1-9) and Structural (10-11) Features of Individual Social Networks and Duocentric Networks (12-14)

Social network variable	Wives' networks													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Husbands' networks														
1. Number of good relationships	-.14	-.17	.16	.51**	.41**	.42**	.27**	.25	-.10	-.01	.12	.03	-.22	-.63**
2. Number of own family members	.27*	.34**	.08	-.13	.005	.05	-.12	-.19	-.03	.01	-.25	-.35**	.37**	.07
3. Number of spouse family members	-.01	.08	.05	.02	-.09	.01	-.05	.09	.07	.25	.18	.24	.29*	-.04
4. Number of sources of emotional support	.26	.18	.13	.12	.76**	.74**	.49**	.42**	.20	.29*	.21	.08	-.16	-.41**
5. Number of sources of tangible support	.20	.30*	.16	.55**	-.16	.68**	.62**	.41**	.15	.39**	.25	.09	-.32*	-.38*
6. Number of alters needing emotional support	.31*	.04	-.12	.49**	.29*	.13	.65**	.44**	.12	.28*	.38**	.06	-.34*	-.41*
7. Number of alters needing tangible support	.33*	.11	-.07	.52**	.46**	.47**	-.12	.46**	.11	.44*	.51**	.20	-.42**	-.32*
8. Number of alters currently married	.06	-.34**	.05	.20	.26*	.06	.29*	.51**	.16	.23	.40**	.34**	-.29*	-.26
9. Number of alters ever divorced	.23	.14	.01	.15	.04	.07	-.06	-.11	.15	-.02	.04	.10	.07	.19
10. Density	.07	-.11	.11	.23	.20	.21	.35**	.24	-.02	-.01	.48*	.22	.05	-.05
11. Spouse degree	.05	-.02	-.07	.18	.08	.07	.04	.12	.05	-.15	.22	.60**	-.38**	-.14
12. Number of overlapping alters	.01	-.38**	.28*	-.14	-.05	-.17	-.15	.27*	-.11	-.01	.38**	—	-.28*	-.01
13. Proportion of family in overlap	.23	.46**	.25	.11	.14	.02	.09	-.25	.15	-.25	-.17	-.28*	—	.26
14. Proportion of discordant relationships in overlap	.38**	.37**	.02	.07	-.01	.07	-.01	-.12	.29*	-.04	.15	-.01	.26	—

*p < .05. **p < .01.

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1 the overlapping region for both spouses; that
 2 is, the more that both spouses shared individu-
 3 als in their networks, the less likely those indi-
 4 viduals were to be their family members. The
 5 number of overlapping ties was also significantly
 6 positively associated with the number of mar-
 7 ried individuals in each spouse's individual net-
 8 works, suggesting that couples who interact with
 9 more married people are also more likely to
 10 share network ties.

11 Race was separately examined as a moder-
 12 ator of each of the 91 correlations across all
 13 combinations of the 13 social network variables.
 14 For wives, none of the 91 correlations were
 15 significantly different between racial groups.
 16 For husbands, five of the 91 correlations differed
 17 significantly between racial groups. Thus, the
 18 vast majority of the network features correlated
 19 similarly across groups and in the expected
 20 directions, justifying further analyses of these
 21 variables. Moreover, the modest correlations
 22 indicate that these features of social networks
 23 are relatively independent, warranting their
 24 treatment as unique variables of interest in
 25 further analyses.

26 27 *Racial Differences in Individual Network* 28 *Composition* 29

30 In Table 2 we present unstandardized beta
 31 coefficients and standard errors testing for racial
 32 differences in individual network composition.
 33 In contrast to the suggestion that Black couples
 34 may maintain closer ties with their social
 35 networks than White couples (Broman, 1996;
 36 McAdoo, 1998), Black wives reported having
 37 significantly fewer positive relationships in their
 38 network than did White wives. Specifically,
 39 White wives, on average, rated 34.2 of their 40
 40 network ties as positive relationships, whereas
 41 Black wives characterized only 30.7 of their 40
 42 network ties as positive, on average ($p < .05$).
 43 Black and White husbands' did not significantly
 44 differ in the number of positive relationships
 45 in their network; neither did they significantly
 46 differ from White wives.

47 With respect to the types of relationships
 48 in husbands' and wives' networks, Black hus-
 49 bands and wives included nearly twice as
 50 many of their own family members in their
 51 network as White husbands and wives (for
 52 Black husbands, $M = 12.2$, $SD = 7.3$, for Black
 53 wives, $M = 12.4$, $SD = 6.0$, for White husbands,
 54 $M = 6.5$, $SD = 5.0$, for White wives, $M = 6.7$,

$SD = 4.2$; $p < .001$ for both wife and husband
 comparisons). In contrast, Black husbands
 included significantly fewer members of their
 spouses' family than did White husbands (for
 White husbands, $M = 3.0$, $SD = 2.1$, for Black
 husbands, $M = 1.7$, $SD = 1.9$; $p = .03$). Black
 and White wives did not differ significantly in
 the number of their spouses' family members
 included in their individual networks.

10 Considering the intersection between rela-
 11 tionship type and relationship quality, further
 12 analyses revealed that Black and White hus-
 13 bands did not differ in the number of negative
 14 relationships with their wives' family members
 15 but that Black husbands ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.6$)
 16 reported significantly fewer positive relation-
 17 ships with their wives' family members than did
 18 White husbands ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 2.0$, $p < .01$). No
 19 significant difference in the quality of in-law
 20 relationships was observed between Black and
 21 White wives' social networks ($p > .05$).

22 The fact that Black wives and husbands
 23 included more family members in their net-
 24 works raises the possibility that Black couples
 25 could access more support from their networks
 26 than White couples, given that people are most
 27 likely to receive support from family (Wellman
 28 & Wortley, 1990). These data offered no support
 29 for this idea. On the contrary, neither wives
 30 nor husbands differed significantly by race in
 31 the number of sources of tangible support, and
 32 White and Black husbands did not differ signif-
 33 icantly in the number of sources of emotional
 34 support from their network. The one significant
 35 racial difference in support exchange was a
 36 relative disadvantage for Black couples, such
 37 that Black wives perceived having significantly
 38 fewer ties in their network to which they could
 39 turn for emotional support than did White wives.
 40 With respect to the demands made by network
 41 members, Black and White couples did not
 42 differ significantly in the number of people
 43 they believed would seek emotional or tangible
 44 support from them; neither did they differ in
 45 the number of people who were financially
 46 struggling in their networks ($p > .05$).

47 Not surprisingly, 80% of Black couples'
 48 network members were Black individuals, and
 49 82% of White couples' network members were
 50 White individuals. Consistent with national
 51 trends showing that Black couples have lower
 52 rates of marriage than White couples, Black hus-
 53 bands and wives reported that about one third
 54 of their networks consisted of currently married

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Tests of Racial Differences in Husbands' and Wives' Individual Networks

Social network variable	Husbands						Wives							
	Black			White			Black			White				
	M	SD	B	M	SD	B	M	SD	B	M	SD	B	Adj. B ^a	
Network composition														
Number of good relationships	35.4	5.1	1.7 (1.5)	33.8	5.7	1.7 (1.5)	30.7	6.0	3.4 (1.5)*	34.2	4.7	5.8 (1.4)**	2.8 (2.1)	-2.7 (2.2)
Number of own family members	12.2	7.3	6.0 (1.5)**	6.5	5.0	6.0 (1.5)**	12.4	6.0	2.3 (0.6)*	6.7	4.2	2.5 (0.6)	0.5 (1.0)	-6.9 (3.9)
Number of spouse family members	1.7	1.9	-1.2 (0.6)*	3.0	2.1	-1.2 (0.6)*	3.4	2.3	11.7 (2.3)	3.7	2.5	8.3 (2.6)**	-2.2 (4.6)	-1.4 (3.5)
Number of sources of emotional support	22.7	13.3	-0.4 (3.2)	23.0	10.3	-0.4 (3.2)	19.3	10.6	20.2 (4.3)	26.6	9.5	16.2 (10.6)	8.3 (3.6)	-3.6 (2.4)
Number of sources of tangible support	24.6	12.5	0.4 (2.9)	24.2	9.6	0.4 (2.9)	20.2	11.7	17.6 (4.2)	24.0	11.0	18.4 (6.1)	6.1 (2.4)	-0.1 (1.5)
Number of alters needing emotional support	23.8	13.6	2.3 (3.0)	20.5	8.9	2.3 (3.0)	17.6	9.1	4.2 (4.4)	20.6	8.5	5.7 (3.8)	0.1 (0.1)	0.1 (0.1)
Number of alters needing tangible support	24.3	12.9	1.6 (3.1)	22.7	10.2	1.6 (3.1)	16.2	10.6	-3.0 (2.1)	12.3	5.7	3.8 (1.5)	0.1 (0.1)	-0.1 (0.1)
Number of alters currently married	11.8	6.5	-7.1 (1.5)**	18.2	5.5	-7.1 (1.5)**	12.3	5.7	1.7 (0.1)	5.7	3.8	0.3 (0.2)	0.8 (0.1)	-0.1 (0.1)
Number of alters ever divorced	4.4	3.6	1.0 (0.8)	3.5	2.7	1.0 (0.8)	5.7	3.8	0.7 (0.2)	0.7	0.2	0.2 (0.1)	0.1 (0.1)	-0.1 (0.1)
Network structure														
Density	0.3	0.2	-0.1 (0.1)	0.4	0.3	-0.1 (0.1)	0.3	0.2	0.3 (0.1)	0.3	0.1	0.2 (0.1)	0.1 (0.1)	0.1 (0.1)
Spouse degree	0.6	0.3	-0.1 (0.1)	0.7	0.3	-0.1 (0.1)	0.7	0.2	0.7 (0.2)	0.8	0.1	0.2 (0.1)	0.1 (0.1)	-0.1 (0.1)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Adj. = adjusted. ^aRacial differences after adjusting for age, income, and parental status. *p < .05. **p < .01.

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1 individuals (for husbands, $M = 11.8$, $SD = 6.5$;
 2 for wives, $M = 12.3$, $SD = 5.7$), whereas White
 3 husbands and wives reported that nearly half of
 4 the individuals in their networks were married
 5 (for husbands, $M = 18.2$, $SD = 5.5$; for wives,
 6 $M = 18.4$, $SD = 6.1$). Black and White couples
 7 did not differ significantly in the number of
 8 divorced network members in their networks.

9 To evaluate the extent to which the observed
 10 differences in the composition of Black and
 11 White spouses' social networks can be attributed
 12 to economic and demographic differences
 13 between the two groups, Table 2 also pro-
 14 vides tests of racial differences in each of
 15 these compositional features after adjusting for
 16 between-group differences in age, income, and
 17 parental status. For wives, all of the significant
 18 differences in social network composition were
 19 reduced to nonsignificance when including eco-
 20 nomic and demographic variables; that is, the
 21 social disadvantages observed in the networks
 22 of Black wives relative to White wives could
 23 be attributed to the fact that Black wives in
 24 this sample were younger, more likely to be
 25 parents, and earned less income than the White
 26 wives in this sample. For husbands, most of
 27 the significant differences between Blacks and
 28 Whites in the composition of their networks
 29 could similarly be explained by economic and
 30 demographic variables, but Black husbands
 31 were still found to include fewer of their wives'
 32 family members within their networks even
 33 after including the control variables than White
 34 husbands. Thus, the reduced number of con-
 35 nections between Black husbands and their
 36 wives' families relative to White husbands is not
 37 merely a function of demographic differences
 38 between these groups.

39
 40 *Racial Differences in Individual Network*
 41 *Structure*
 42

43 Also presented in Table 2 are unstandardized
 44 beta coefficients and standard errors testing for
 45 racial differences in the density of spouses'
 46 individual networks and the centrality of one's
 47 partner in their network (spouse degree). As
 48 the data reveal, Black and White husbands' and
 49 wives' networks did not differ significantly in
 50 density, but did differ significantly in spouse
 51 degree, such that Black wives reported their
 52 husbands as having significantly a lower degree
 53 (i.e., fewer connections to other members of
 54 the wife's network) than White wives reported

1 for their husbands. This difference was fully
 2 accounted for by demographic differences
 3 between Black and White wives. Spouse degree
 4 reported by Black and White husbands did not
 5 differ significantly.
 6

7 *Racial Differences in Duocentric Social*
 8 *Networks*
 9

10 Unstandardized beta coefficients and stan-
 11 dard errors testing for racial differences
 12 in characteristics of couples' duocentric
 13 networks—specifically, the number of over-
 14 lapping individuals, the proportion of family
 15 members in the overlapping region, and the
 16 proportion of discordant relationships in the
 17 overlapping region—are presented in Table 3.
 18 As the data reveal, Black and White couples dif-
 19 fered significantly in the number of overlapping
 20 network members, such that Black couples had
 21 less than half of the shared ties of the White cou-
 22 ples (for Black couples, $M = 6.5$, $SD = 4.0$; for
 23 White couples, $M = 13.5$, $SD = 5.2$; $p < .001$).
 24 This difference remained significant after adjust-
 25 ing for the couples' parental status, age, and
 26 household income.

27 Within these overlapping portions of their net-
 28 works Black couples included a significantly
 29 greater proportion of family than did White
 30 couples. For Black couples, family members
 31 comprised 56% of overlapping alters on aver-
 32 age, whereas for White couples family members
 33 comprised 39% of overlapping alters on average.
 34 This difference was reduced to nonsignificance
 35 when age, parental status, and income were con-
 36 trolled.

37 Consistent with our prediction, spouses'
 38 relationships with their overlapping network
 39 members were significantly more discordant for
 40 Black couples than White couples. Among the
 41 Black couples, about 64% of the shared alters
 42 have a positive relationship with one spouse
 43 but a negative or neutral relationship with the
 44 other. Discordant relationships such as this
 45 characterized only 22% of the shared relation-
 46 ships among White couples. This difference
 47 remained significant even after demographic
 48 differences between Black and White couples
 49 were controlled.

50 In cases where racial differences between
 51 Black and White couples were reduced to non-
 52 significance, post hoc analyses (not reported
 53 here) revealed no consistent patterns across
 54 the husbands' and wives' individual networks

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Tests of Racial Differences in Husbands' and Wives' Duocentric Networks

Variables	Black		White		<i>B</i>	Adj. <i>B</i> ^a
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Number of overlapping alters	6.5	4.0	13.5	5.2	-7.2 (1.3)**	-8.0 (2.0)**
Proportion of family in overlap	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.2 (0.1)*	0.0 (0.1)
Proportion of discordant relationships in overlap	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.2	0.1 (0.1)*	0.2 (0.1)*

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Adj. = adjusted.

^aRacial differences after adjusting for age, income, and parental status.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

and their duocentric network for which of the three control variables were most influential in accounting for racial differences across the networks.

DISCUSSION

In the current study, we drew on extensive social network interviews with recently married Black and White couples to explore whether low-income Black couples enter their marriages with social disadvantage relative to Whites or whether, as some have argued (e.g., Hill, 1999; McAdoo, 1998), social networks may be a unique source of strength for low-income Black couples and thus a possible way to compensate for a lack of financial resources.

The results of these analyses support two general conclusions. First, in addition to their relative economic disadvantages, Black couples in low-income communities enter their marriages with several social disadvantages relative to White couples living in similar neighborhoods. For example, compared to the White couples, the Black couples in this sample began their marriages embedded in networks that included more family members, but Black wives nevertheless reported fewer sources of emotional support within their networks, and fewer good quality relationships more generally, than White wives did. Existing research has observed similar differences in the support networks available to Black and White women, attributing the differences to Black women's accumulated experiences with family disruption (e.g., Neighbors, 1997; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). The current findings suggest that, even among partnered women who have yet to experience marital disruption themselves, Black wives may already have less access to the sorts of relationships that might promote the stability of their marriages. Consistent with this view, Black husbands and

wives also included significantly fewer married individuals in their networks than White husbands and wives did. Booth et al. (1991) argued that younger couples navigating the transition into marriage are especially likely to benefit from access to other couples who have negotiated that transition successfully. To the extent that Black spouses have access to fewer of these couples at the outset of their marriages, they may lack exposure to norms of marital stability during the period when such exposure is particularly important.

The second general conclusion supported by these results is that most of the social disadvantages of low-income Black couples entering marriage covary with economic and demographic differences between Black and White couples. Consistent with prior research on social support in Black and White families (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004), most of the significant differences in the composition of Black and White social networks were eliminated after controlling for differences in income, age, and parental status between Black and White couples. Nevertheless, important differences between Black and White couples remained significant even after adjusting for economic differences. The most striking social disadvantages for Black couples emerged not in the composition of spouses' individual networks but in the structure of their combined networks, and these differences remained significant, and were even slightly higher, after adjusting for control variables. On average, the overlap within Black couples' duocentered networks contained only half as many individuals as the overlap within White couples' networks. Within that area of overlap, Black couples were more likely to report discordant relationships, that is, individuals with a positive relationship with one spouse but a neutral or negative relationship with the other spouse. Combined with the finding that Black

1 husbands include fewer of their wives' family
2 members in their networks than White husbands,
3 these results indicate that Black couples begin
4 their marriages with less integrated social net-
5 works than their similarly situated White peers.

6 Given that these structural differences are
7 independent of demographic differences that
8 otherwise distinguish between first-married
9 Black and White newlyweds, why might they
10 emerge? One possibility is that Black spouses
11 are less likely to engage with each other's net-
12 works. If the networks of Black couples contain
13 fewer people with available resources, Black
14 spouses may see fewer benefits in connecting
15 with each other's family and friends and so may
16 not exert the effort it takes to do so (Roschelle,
17 1997). An alternative (but compatible) possibil-
18 ity is that the networks of Black spouses are less
19 likely to welcome and embrace both members
20 of a couple. To the extent that members of the
21 network surrounding a couple are aware of the
22 higher vulnerability of Black marriages, they
23 may see more risks in investing in a relationship
24 that they perceive is likely to end. Evaluating
25 the evidence for these explanations is a task
26 for future research, but either possibility leaves
27 Black couples lacking a social context that
28 is associated with more stable and satisfying
29 marriages among White couples (Burger &
30 Milardo, 1995; Kearns & Leonard, 2004).

31 *Strengths and Limitations*

32
33
34 Several strengths of the current study heighten
35 our confidence in these results. First, whereas
36 prior research comparing Black and White
37 social networks has frequently confounded race,
38 class, and marital status, all of the couples we
39 examined were first-married newlyweds sam-
40 pled from similarly low-income neighborhoods.
41 Second, whereas prior studies of social networks
42 have relied on individuals' perceptions of their
43 networks as a whole, the network characteristics
44 we examined were derived from social network
45 interviews that assessed each of 40 network
46 members individually, offering details about
47 network composition and structure that spouses
48 would not have been able to identify when asked
49 more globally. Third, whereas prior studies of
50 racial differences in social networks have relied
51 on reports from individuals, in the current study
52 we were able to examine duocentric networks
53 assembled from interviews with both spouses in
54 each couple.

1 Despite these strengths, interpretations of
2 the current study must also be tempered by
3 several limitations. First, although all couples
4 were recruited using the same procedures and
5 from the same neighborhoods, Black couples
6 nevertheless differed from the White couples
7 in numerous ways. Three notable differences
8 (income, age, and parental status) were identi-
9 fied and controlled, but additional uncontrolled
10 differences may yet account for the persist-
11 ent racial differences observed here. Second,
12 although the current study identified racial
13 differences in characteristics of social networks
14 that have been associated with marital out-
15 comes such as satisfaction and divorce, the
16 links between those network characteristics
17 and subsequent marital outcomes were not
18 examined. A priority for future research is to
19 examine whether differences in social networks
20 among Black and White couples beginning
21 their marriages account for racial disparities
22 in their subsequent marital outcomes. Third,
23 these social network data were obtained at a
24 single moment in these couples' lives. Without
25 longitudinal data, we cannot know whether the
26 social network features described here are stable
27 or whether they change over time and thus
28 may be the consequences of marital outcomes
29 rather than potential causes. Fourth, although
30 the relative homogeneity of the couples we
31 examined is beneficial for limiting the potential
32 for confounds associated with marital duration
33 and economic status, it also limits our ability to
34 extend the conclusions of this research to other
35 populations. In particular, the same racial dif-
36 ferences may not describe the social networks
37 of older couples, where higher divorce rates
38 among Blacks may lead to greater differences
39 between Black and White couples who remain
40 intact, or these data may not represent couples
41 who do not marry.

42 *Implications for Theory and Intervention*

43
44
45 Evidence for differences in the social networks
46 of Black and White low-income couples at the
47 outset of their marriages has implications for
48 both theory and intervention. With respect to the-
49 ory, the current findings draw attention to the dis-
50 tinct views of low-income marriage that emerge
51 from ethnographic versus quantitative research.
52 Ethnographies of Black families and marriages
53 have frequently emphasized the independence
54 of economic and social resources in low-income

1 communities, suggesting that low-income fam-
 2 ilies, and Black families in particular, invest
 3 in their social networks, building social capi-
 4 tal to compensate for a relative lack of finan-
 5 cial capital (Hill, 1999; McAdoo, 1998). The
 6 current analyses reveal no support for such a
 7 view. Instead, social capital and financial cap-
 8 ital appear strongly and positively associated,
 9 such that couples who possess the least finan-
 10 cial capital (i.e., lowest incomes) are those with
 11 the least social capital (i.e., fewer positive rela-
 12 tionships, fewer sources of support, less over-
 13 lap between spouses). Additional support for
 14 this finding would suggest that developing social
 15 capital may not come easily for couples who are
 16 also struggling financially.

17 With respect to intervention, further support
 18 for this perspective would highlight new direc-
 19 tions for efforts to support low-income families,
 20 and low-income Black marriages in particular.
 21 Current efforts to improve the relationships of
 22 low-income couples focus almost exclusively
 23 on interventions targeting the way partners
 24 communicate and resolve problems with each
 25 other (Ooms, 2005). To date, evaluations of
 26 the impact of such programs on marital out-
 27 comes in low-income communities have proven
 28 disappointing (Wood, McConnell, Moore,
 29 & Clarkwest, 2010). We suggest expanding
 30 the focus of these efforts to include the way
 31 spouses interact with members of their own
 32 and each other's social networks. There may be
 33 approaches to one's community (e.g., selecting
 34 people with whom to interact, making an effort
 35 to be closer to each other's friends and family)
 36 that could affect couples' ability to maintain
 37 their marriages (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts,
 38 2009). Put more broadly, acknowledging the
 39 social disadvantages that some couples face
 40 may direct the attention of policymakers toward
 41 interventions that address social networks
 42 themselves as targets of change.

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 48
 49

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