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Patterns of Emotional Social Support and Negative Interactions among African American and Black Caribbean Extended Families

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Family relationships are a critical component of daily life. Family members provide tangible support such as child care and care for individuals who are ill. Family members also provide emotional support in terms of advice, compassion and caring. Research among African American families indicates that assistance provided by social support networks is protective for well-being and mental health (Mendenhall, Bowman & Zhang, 2013). Emotional support from family members is a protective factor for psychological distress (Gray & Keith, 2003; Lincoln et al., 2007), as well as suicidal behaviors (Lincoln et al., 2012). However, families can also be a significant source of stress. Negative interactions with family members in the form of arguments and criticisms are detrimental to mental health and are a risk factor for depressive symptoms (Lincoln, Chatters, Taylor & Jackson, 2007), mood and anxiety disorders (Lincoln et al., 2010), and suicidal behaviors (Lincoln et al., 2012). The goal of this study is to more fully understand the dual nature of extended family relationships by investigating the patterns of emotional support and negative interaction among African Americans and Black Caribbeans. The study uses data from the National Survey of American Life.

The literature review first addresses research on social support and negative interaction. This is followed by a section describing research on family relationships among African

Americans and Caribbean Blacks, including studies exploring the positive and negative features of family relationships. The literature review concludes by examining conceptual approaches and analytic strategies for examining patterns of emotional support and negative interaction within diverse groups of the Black American population.

Social Support and Negative Interaction

Social support (aid, affect, information and affirmation) from family and friends has beneficial effects on well-being and mental health outcomes (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Gray & Keith, 2003; Lincoln et al., 2007; Lincoln, Taylor, Bullard, et al., 2010; Wethington & Kessler, 1986) and is thought to function through various pathways to promote positive outcomes. Tangible aid in the form of money and goods and services provides direct assistance for handling personal problems (financial problems) that are sources of distress. Expressions of positive personal regard, high emotional intimacy (expressions of liking, caring) and affiliation (interaction and contact) bolsters emotional well-being, promotes feelings of competence, self-worth and esteem, and engenders social connections. Social support can also take the form of information or cognitive assistance (advice, suggestions, role modeling) which may help individuals develop effective coping strategies for handling personal problems (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

The majority of research on social support examines the beneficial features of interactions with and social support from family members and friends. However, more recent work on so-called, negative interactions (i.e., criticisms, arguments, conflicts, demands and broken promises), examines the problematic aspects of these relationships (Lincoln, 2000). In the research literature the specific term, negative interaction, is used rather frequently. However, researchers also use a multitude of terms including social strain, problematic social relationships, and negative social exchanges (see review by Lincoln, 2000). Negative interactions are common features of interpersonal relationships that are more significant than transient annoyances and irritations and, further, have the potential to cause psychological harm. In many instances, negative interactions may cause individuals to have some reservations about the relationship. Negative interactions may constitute direct sources of stress that are associated with adverse mental and physical states (Almeida & Horn, 2004; Cohen et al., 1997; King, Atienza, Castro, & Collins, 2002; Newsom, Nishishiba, Morgan, & Rook, 2003; Rook, 1984; Seeman & Chen, 2002; Tanne, Goldbourt, & Medalie, 2004). Negative interactions and other interpersonal stressors arouse high levels of distress for individuals (Zautra, Burleson, Matt, Roth, & Burrows, 1994) and persist over a long period of time (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). Further, distinctive from the effects of social support, negative interactions erode perceived competence, self-efficacy and self-esteem, disrupt problem-solving and interfere with effective help-seeking efforts (Lincoln, 2000).

Family Relationships Among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks

Understanding social relationships among Black Americans is important for several reasons. Family and friend social support networks are a prominent feature of Black American life that has had a pivotal role in shaping the forms, organization and sustainability of Black

American families and communities. Despite the importance of social networks, few studies examine the complexity of social relationships and interactions within this population. This is particularly so for negative interaction with family and friends which has only recently been examined within this group (Lincoln, Chatters, & Taylor, 2003; Lincoln et al., 2007; Lincoln, Taylor, Bullard et al., 2010). Further, prior investigations of social support are often limited with respect to sample representativeness (e.g., local, geographically restricted samples) and/or have inadequate measures of social support and negative interaction. Although detailed understanding of these issues is sparse, new research is beginning to elaborate sociodemographic and ethnic (i.e., native African American and Black Caribbean) variation in social support and negative interaction within the Black population.

Research specifically focusing on Black Caribbean highlights the importance of the immigration experience and the geographic dispersion of families in shaping support networks and interactions. Black Caribbean family and social networks operate to provide assistance to their members locally, nationally and transnationally. The majority of research on Black Caribbean family support networks is qualitative or ethnographic and focused on issues of family migration transitions from home to host nations and the maintenance of transnational kinship relations (Olwig, 2007; Chamberlain, 1999, 2003; Ho, 1991, 1993; Thompson & Bauer, 2000). The kin and social networks employed by Black Caribbean immigrants provide considerable amounts of support to relatives and network members ranging from monetary gifts in the form of remittances, to consumer goods (e.g., clothing, small appliances, electronics, non-perishable food). Kin support among Black Caribbeans is an adaptive economic strategy often employed by immigrant families to redistribute resources across several kin-related households within the network and reduce economic and financial risks (Thompson & Bauer, 2000; Barrow, 1999; Gussler, 1999). Further, these networks operate with informal norms and expectations of support reciprocity among the members (Bashi, 2007; Thompson & Bauer, 2000; Chamberlain 1999, 2003; Ho 1999).

Recent research indicates that both positive and negative features are often encountered in Black Americans' social relationships (Lincoln, Taylor, & Chatters, 2003; Lincoln, Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 2007). In an early study on interpersonal problems experienced by African American families, Neighbors (1997) found that roughly half of the personal problems experienced by African Americans were interpersonal in nature and 83% of them directly involved family members (e.g., spouse, parent, child, sibling, and relatives). Lincoln et al.'s (2003) analysis of a sample of older black adults found that the vast majority of relationships with family and friends were characterized as supportive and only rarely did respondents report negative interactions with family and friends.

In a recent study of African Americans and Black Caribbeans (Lincoln et al., in press-2013), both groups reported: 1) comparable levels of emotional support and negative interactions with family members and 2) that emotional support was more characteristic of family relationships than negative interaction. Similarly, for both groups younger age, female gender, being widowed or never married, and higher subjective closeness to family were associated with more emotional support and fewer negative interactions with family. However, level of family contact was positively associated with emotional closeness among African Americans, but not among Black Caribbeans—possibly a reflection of the

consequence of having kin networks that are geographically dispersed (i.e., transnational families). Among Black Caribbeans only, higher income was associated with more emotional closeness, while immigration history and country of origin were associated with negative interaction with family. These preliminary findings indicate that while African Americans and Black Caribbeans share some similarities in reported levels and correlates of emotional support and negative interaction, they differ in other ways that reflect unique features of their life histories and family organization (national origin, family dispersion).

Patterns of Emotional Support and Negative Interaction

Given that both emotional support and negative interaction are anticipated and customary features of social relationships, it is important to examine them jointly to determine specific patterns of emotional support and negative interaction and their sociodemographic and family correlates. This approach allows us to determine the combinations of emotional support and negative interaction (e.g., high support/high negative interaction, high support/low negative interaction), the sociodemographic correlates of these patterns and whether African Americans and Black Caribbeans differ in the overall types observed or their correlates. Accordingly, we constructed a four category variable which delineates different patterns of emotional support and negative interaction, specifically: 1) high emotional support, coupled with high negative interaction, 2) high emotional support and low negative interaction, 3) low emotional support and low negative interaction, and 4) low emotional support and high negative interaction.

Adults in the first category (high emotional support/high negative interaction) reflect a situation characterized by ambivalent family support networks. Family interactions in these networks are characterized by high levels of criticism and gossiping, but coupled with considerable amounts of emotional support. For the sake of simplicity we have characterized respondents in this category (high emotional support/high negative interaction) as being involved in *ambivalent support networks*. This is consistent with previous research on patterns of support networks by Uchino and colleagues (Uchino et al., 2001). Persons in the second category (high emotional support/low negative interaction) are in the most advantageous position. They perceive high levels of emotional support coupled with low levels of criticisms and demands from their network members. We have termed individuals in this category as having *optimal support networks*.

The third category (low emotional support/low negative interaction) may represent respondents who are involved in *estranged support networks*. Although there is little emotional support from the network, negative interaction is also limited. This pattern is distinctive because estrangement from families and other social networks (and their resources and emotional support) is thought to be detrimental for personal well-being and mental health outcomes. However, for some individuals, estrangement from family and friend networks may be desirable due to the severity of problems inherent in these networks and/or longstanding and unresolved difficulties with interpersonal relationships, (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, criminal activity, or recurrent interpersonal conflict). Distancing themselves from problematic networks may reduce interpersonal conflict and

other negative interactions which, in turn, potentially lower risks for stress and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

Respondents in the last category (low emotional support/high negative interaction) are characterized as members of *strained support networks*. They perceive that their networks are not particularly supportive, coupled with being highly critical of them. Of the four groups, the combination of problematic relationships and low support from their networks may place these individuals at the highest risk for loneliness, depression, and other mental health problems.

Focus of the Present Investigation

The present study explores the sociodemographic and family correlates of patterns of emotional support and negative interaction among African Americans and Black Caribbeans using data from the National Survey of American Life. This study builds on prior work that recognizes that social support and negative interaction are common and distinctive features of human interactions and relationships. Uchino and colleagues (Uchino et al., 2001; Uchino et al., 2004) maintain that it is critical to investigate the patterns of emotional support and negative interaction. They argue that by ignoring the co-occurrence of emotional support and negative interaction, previous research may have obscured reliable associations between family relationships and various psychological and mental health outcomes. Accordingly, a focus on both positive and negative aspects of social relationships is needed to fully appreciate their dual nature and contribute to a better understanding of social relationships within diverse subgroups of the Black American population.

METHODS

Sample

The National Survey of American Life: Coping with Stress in the 21st Century (NSAL) was collected by the Program for Research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. The field work for the study was completed by the Institute for Social Research's Survey Research Center, in cooperation with the Program for Research on Black Americans. The NSAL sample has a national multi-stage probability design which consists of 64 primary sampling units (PSUs). Fifty-six of these primary areas overlap substantially with existing Survey Research Center's National Sample primary areas. The remaining eight primary areas were chosen from the South in order for the sample to represent African Americans in the proportion in which they are distributed nationally.

The NSAL includes the first major probability sample of Black Caribbeans. For this study, Black Caribbeans are defined as persons who trace their ethnic heritage to a Caribbean country, but now reside in the United States, are racially classified as Black, and who are English-speaking (but may also speak another language). In both the African American and Black Caribbean samples, it was necessary for respondents to self-identify their race as black. Those self-identifying as black were included in the Black Caribbean sample if they: 1) answered affirmatively when asked if they were of West Indian or Caribbean descent, b) said they were from a country included on a list of Caribbean area countries presented by the

interviewers, or c) indicated that their parents or grandparents were born in a Caribbean area country.

The data collection was conducted from February 2001 to June 2003; respondents were compensated for their time. A total of 6,082 face-to-face interviews were conducted with persons aged 18 or older, including 3,570 African Americans, 891 non-Hispanic Whites, and 1,621 Blacks of Caribbean descent. This analysis is based on the African American and Black Caribbean sub-samples ($n=5,191$). The overall response rate was 72.3%. Response rates for subgroups were 70.7% for African Americans and 77.7% for Black Caribbeans. Final response rates for the NSAL two-phase sample designs were computed using the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) guidelines (for Response Rate 3 samples) (AAPOR 2006) (see Jackson et al. 2004 for a more detailed discussion of the NSAL sample). The NSAL data collection was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Dependent Variables—The dependent variable combines three measures of emotional support and three measures of negative interaction. Emotional support is measured by an index of 3 items in which respondents were asked “Other than your (spouse/partner) how often do your family members: 1) make you feel loved and cared for, 2) listen to you talk about your private problems and concerns, and 3) express interest and concern in your well-being?” The response categories for these questions were “very often,” “fairly often,” “not too often” and “never.” Higher values on this index indicate higher levels of emotional support received. Cronbach’s alpha for this 3-item index is 0.75 for African Americans and 0.72 for Caribbean Blacks. Negative interaction is also measured by an index of 3 items. Respondents were asked “Other than your (spouse/partner) how often do your family members: 1) make too many demands on you, 2) criticize you and the things you do and 3) try to take advantage of you?” Response categories range from “very often” to “never” with higher values on this index indicating more frequent negative interactions with family members. Cronbach’s alpha for this 3-item index is 0.73 for African Americans and 0.74 for Caribbean Blacks.

These two items were combined into single, four-category pattern variable. The four categories of this variable correspond to respondents who have: 1) high levels of perceived emotional support and high levels negative interaction with network members (Ambivalent), 2) high levels of emotional support and low levels of negative interaction (Optimal), 3) low levels of perceived emotional support and low levels of negative interaction (Estranged), or 4) low levels of perceived emotional support and high levels of negative interaction with family members (Strained).

Independent Variables—Two family network variables are included as independent variables – frequency of contact with family members and subjective closeness to family. Frequency of contact with family members is measured by the question: “How often do you see, write or talk on the telephone with family or relatives who do not live with you? Would you say nearly everyday, at least once a week, a few times a month, at least once a month, a

few times a year, hardly ever or never?” Degree of subjective closeness to family is measured by the question: “How close do you feel towards your family members? Would you say very close, fairly close, not too close or not close at all?” Higher values on these items indicate higher levels of contact and closeness to family members.

The sociodemographic variables include age, gender, family income, education, marital status, region, and foreign born. Region is included in analysis on African Americans whereas foreign born is included in analysis on Black Caribbeans. Missing data for household income was imputed for 773 cases (12.7% of the NSAL sample). Missing data for education was imputed for 74 cases. Imputations were completed using an iterative regression-based multiple imputation approach incorporating information about age, gender, region, race, employment status, marital status, home ownership, and nativity of household residents. Income is coded in dollars and for the multivariate analysis only was divided by 5000 in order to increase effect sizes and provide a better understanding of the net impact of income on the dependent variables. The distribution for all of the dependent and independent variables utilized in this analysis is presented in Table 1.

Analysis Strategy

Multinomial logistic regression (Agresti, 1990) was used to analyze the data. Multinomial logistic regression is appropriate for the four-level polytomous response outcome variable used in this study (i.e., patterns of emotional support and negative interaction) and can accommodate both continuous and categorical independent variables. The reference category is having optimal relationships with support networks (high emotional support/low negative interaction). The format and interpretation of this analysis is similar to dummy variable regression and consists of contrasts between a comparison and an excluded category. However, in multinomial logistic regression, comparisons between selected categories and the excluded category involve the dependent variable (as opposed to the independent variable in standard dummy variable regression). The four-category dependent variable yields six unique comparisons: 1) Optimal vs. Strained, 2) Optimal vs. Ambivalent, 3) Optimal vs. Estranged, 4) Strained vs. Ambivalent, 5) Estranged vs. Ambivalent, and 6) Strained vs. Estranged. However, given our particular theoretical interest, and the complexity of this analysis and interpretation of results, only three of the comparisons will be presented. Specifically, the results focus on contrasts involving: 1) Ambivalent vs. Optimal, 2) Estranged vs. Optimal, 3) Strained vs. Optimal.

Three multinomial logistic regression analyses are conducted. The first regression contrasts African Americans and Black Caribbeans and examines the patterns of emotional support and negative interaction for both. In this regression, African American is the excluded or comparison category. No significant differences were found and therefore results from this analysis are not presented. Next, subgroup analyses are presented—one set of analysis is conducted exclusively with African Americans and a second set of analysis is conducted exclusively among Black Caribbeans. Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) and 95% Confidence Intervals are presented. The analyses were conducted using SAS 9.13 which uses the Taylor expansion approximation technique for calculating the complex design-based estimates of variance. To obtain results that are generalizable to the African American and Black

Caribbean populations, all of the analyses utilize analytic weights. All statistical analyses accounted for the complex multistage clustered design of the NSAL sample, unequal probabilities of selection, nonresponse, and poststratification to calculate weighted, national representative population estimates and standard errors. All percentages reported are weighted.

Results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample and study variables for African Americans and Black Caribbeans. The African American subsample has more women, while Black Caribbeans have higher family incomes and are slightly more likely to be married or partnered. Both groups are comparable with respect to other sociodemographic and family factors, as well as observed patterns of emotional support and negative interaction.

Multinomial regression analyses contrasting optimal relationships in the support network with: a) ambivalent relationships (Model 1), b) estranged relationships (Model 2), and, c) strained relationships (Model 3) are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Multinomial regression analysis comparing African Americans and Black Caribbeans did not find any significant differences in the pattern of support networks between these two groups (analysis not shown).

Table 2 presents the multinomial analysis of the patterns of emotional support and negative interaction for African Americans. As revealed in Model 1 there are two significant differences between African Americans who have ambivalent networks and optimal networks. African Americans in ambivalent networks were more likely to be younger and interacted with their extended family less frequently. African Americans in estranged networks (Model 2, Table 2) had less frequent interaction with their extended family, were not as close to their extended family, were more likely to be male, were older, and were less likely to be never married than married. As revealed in Model 3, there are several significant differences between respondents who have strained networks and optimal networks. Respondents in strained networks had less frequent interaction with their extended family, were not as close to their extended family, and were less likely to be divorced or never married than married.

Table 3 presents the results of the multinomial regressions of the patterns of emotional support and negative interaction for Black Caribbeans. There are three significant differences between Black Caribbeans who have ambivalent networks and optimal networks (Model 1). Black Caribbeans with ambivalent networks were less subjectively close to their family members, interacted less frequently with their family members and were less likely to be separated than married. As revealed in Model 2 (Table 3) Black Caribbeans in estranged networks had less frequent interaction with their extended family, were not as close to their extended family, were more likely to be male, and were less likely to be divorced than married. Lastly, Black Caribbeans in strained networks had less frequent interaction with their extended family, were more likely to be male, and were more likely to be married than divorced.

Discussion

In the present investigation, a four category variable was constructed that delineated patterns of emotional support and negative interaction. Study findings indicated that individuals who characterized their extended family relationships as optimal (high emotional support/low negative interactions) are advantaged with regard to family factors. In comparison to the other three groups, respondents in optimal support networks were subjectively closer to and interacted more frequently with their extended families, and this was evident for both African Americans and Black Caribbeans. Further, examining patterns of social support and negative interaction provides a different way of characterizing these relationships and revealed findings that diverge from previous research. For instance, Lincoln et al.'s study (in press- 2013) using these same variables found that family contact was significantly associated with emotional support and negative interaction, but only among African Americans. The present analysis using four patterns of emotional support and negative interaction found significant findings for Black Caribbeans. Black Caribbeans, who characterized their support networks as ambivalent, estranged or strained, all had lower levels of family contact than those who described their family networks as optimal.

In regards to sociodemographic correlates, African Americans, men were more likely than women to indicate that their family networks were estranged. This finding is consistent with a body of literature reflecting the gendered nature of family relationships. Research on African American families notes the central importance and role of African American women as “kin keepers” (Stack & Burton, 1993). That is, women tend to be those family members who are more likely to stay in touch with relatives, remember important family events (e.g., birthdays) and who do the “family or emotional” work to insure that family ties remain strong.

Among Black Caribbeans, men were more likely than women to report family networks that were both estranged (low emotional support/low negative interaction) and strained (low emotional support/high negative interaction). Given the limited survey research on the family networks of Caribbean Blacks, as well as research specifically on Black Caribbean men and their family lives, we can only speculate as to the meaning of these findings. Two plausible explanations for the higher rates of estranged and strained family relations among the Black Caribbean men in the study are male withdrawal or marginality from the family and generational factors associated with migration and assimilation.

First, notions of male marginality suggest that Black Caribbean men are peripheral to the family which is primarily matrifocal (Smith, 1996). Men may withdraw from family networks given the high incidence of female-dominated kinship networks (Barrow, 1999; Ho, 1991), combined with cultural expectations of male independence (Smith, 1996). However, both the cultural construction of male marginality and the matrifocal family are bound by social class positioning in the Caribbean. Middle class Black Caribbean families tend to be more nuclear in composition with greater male participation in the family (Barrow, 1999; Douglass, 1992). The present findings of estranged and strained family relations particularly underscore the fact that the social and kin networks of Black Caribbean men are seriously underexplored.

Second, generational status and immigration experience may account for Caribbean men's estranged and strained kinship relations in three very different ways. First-generation immigrants to the U.S. may have experienced disrupted familial attachments due to the migration of parents to host countries. Several authors indicate that separation from primary care givers during childhood and adolescence can have long-term negative impacts on their family ties and relationships (Arnold, 2012). Negative consequences of separation may be less pronounced for females given that matrifocal family networks advantage the involvement of women. Studies focusing on the gendered nature of the migration experience among Caribbean Blacks provide an additional potential explanation for why Black Caribbean men are more likely than their female counterparts to be in strained and estranged networks than optimal networks. Migration to the U.S. provides Caribbean women with new employment and educational opportunities that enhances their personal and financial autonomy and increases their power in the family (Foner, 2005; Waters, 1999). The increased independence for women could result in more strained gender relationships and negative interactions, circumstances that may be particularly stressful for Caribbean men who were socialized in a culture that is more patriarchal and conservative with respect to gender roles (Chevannes, 2001). A final explanation for the higher levels of negative interactions among Caribbean men may be due to the high expectations for success and social and economic mobility that are held by family members. The fulfillment of these expectations may be especially problematic for Caribbean Black men who may face barriers in the U.S. due to both their immigrant status (Foner, 2005) and to racial discrimination (Waters, 1999).

It might be expected that married respondents would be more likely to be in optimal (high emotional support/low negative interaction) support networks than their unmarried (i.e., divorced) counterparts. This is because married African Americans have been found to have larger extended family support networks than their unmarried counterparts (Chatters et al., 1985; 1986). However, among both African Americans and Black Caribbeans, unmarried respondents (i.e., divorced, separated and never married) were more likely to report optimal support networks than their married counterparts. There are two possible explanations for these findings. First, being married does not guarantee that an individual has optimal relationships with their extended families. Among both married African Americans and married Black Caribbeans, negative interaction with extended family members significantly reduces reported levels of marital satisfaction (Taylor et al., 2012). In fact, negative interaction with family is associated with interference or conflict with the marital union that both constitutes a source of stress and has negative consequences for marital satisfaction (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Neighbors, 1997; Serewicz & Canary, 2008).

Second, in the absence of a spouse, individuals may mobilize other family members to provide emotional support. Previous research on older African Americans found that unmarried older adults were more likely than their married counterparts to rely upon a broader social network (i.e., siblings, friends, and neighbors) for assistance (Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 1985, 1986). For unmarried individuals, the active enlistment of extended kin into these broader, multiplex networks may be motivated more by choice than by marital associations and obligations (i.e., in laws). Given this, family networks for unmarried persons may be more strongly based in affiliation needs which results in greater

levels of emotional support and less negative interaction. Further, the specific pattern of findings in terms of types of family networks and the affected marital status categories (for African Americans: never married and divorced respondents; for Black Caribbeans, separated and divorced persons) may warrant additional study to examine how different unmarried statuses are associated with network types.

Finally, two significant age relationships among African Americans (but not Black Caribbeans) indicated that younger respondents were more likely to indicate that they were in ambivalent support networks as opposed to optimal, whereas older respondents were more likely to indicate that they were in estranged networks as opposed to optimal networks. This latter finding is particularly noteworthy. For some individuals, being estranged from family may result from problems and difficulties that they have had with their family members; in which case, being estranged from family members is a choice. For others, however, being estranged from families (low emotional support/low negative interaction) may instead reflect social isolation from their families. This distinction is especially important because social isolation is a particularly problematic among the elderly.

By current estimates, 17% of older adults living in the United States are socially isolated (Theeke, 2007; Ortiz, 2011). Risk factors for social isolation include: divorce, disability, living alone in community residence, living below the poverty level, having difficulty leaving home because of a disability, never getting married, experiencing a major life transition (the loss of a close loved one, changes in employment status), being a caregiver for someone with a severe chronic disease and/or severe cognitive impairment, having psychological or cognitive vulnerabilities (i.e., having clinical depression, an addiction, low self-efficacy or low self-esteem) and residing in a neighborhood/community environment that limits social participation and engagement (Walker & Herbitter, 2005; Elder & Retrum, 2012). Similarly, social isolation is often associated with a host of negative physical and mental health outcomes, including: mortality (Berkman, 1983), depression and depressive symptoms (Lien-Gieschen, 1993), and higher rates of cognitive decline (Barnes et al., 2004).

Although very little research focuses on social isolation among African Americans, the issue is relevant for this group as well. Despite the fact that extended families are supportive overall, there are still groups of African Americans who are socially isolated, especially among the elderly. For instance, Census data indicates that among adults 65 and older, 29.5% of black men and 41.8% of black women live alone, placing them at risk for social isolation. The percent of elderly black men who live alone is significantly higher than that of non-Hispanic whites, Hispanics and Asians. Although people who live alone are not necessarily socially isolated, this is an issue where more research and targeted interventions are potentially needed. Additional studies focusing on living arrangements and extended family networks relationship quality among older African Americans may help to identify individuals who have unrecognized need for support from extended family networks.

Limitations and Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present investigation. Respondents were drawn from non-institutionalized settings (e.g., the military) and thus are not representative

of individuals who reside in these settings. The Black Caribbean sample excludes individuals who do not speak English (i.e., persons who only speak Spanish, Haitian-French, or Creole dialects). As a consequence, study findings are not generalizable to these groups of Caribbean Blacks. Despite these limitations, the innovative approach to examining the co-occurring patterns of emotional support and negative interaction and the advantages of the study sample have provided new insights into qualitative features of extended family networks within these population groups.

This investigation of patterns of emotional support and negative interaction among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks contributes to the literature in several ways. First, examining the co-occurrence of emotional support and negative interaction allows the opportunity to explore how these very different aspects of social relationships characterize extended family networks. Second, the patterns of emotional support and negative interaction demonstrated that networks that were optimal (high emotional support/low negative interaction) did, indeed, possess significant advantages in terms of reported levels of closeness and contact with family. Third, a focus on sociodemographic correlates confirmed that specific extended family network types are differentially distributed within the population on the basis of gender, marital status and age and, further, that particular groups may be at risk for poor network relations.

For example, the findings of this analysis indicated that Black Caribbean men may be disadvantaged in terms of extended family network relationships. These findings, in conjunction with previous research suggest that, a small group of Caribbean Black men may be at risk for mental health problems. First, it is important to note that negative interactions are associated with lower rates of psychological well-being and higher rates of psychological distress (Lincoln, Chatters, & Taylor, 2003; Okun & Keith, 1998; Rook, 1984). Research using the NSAL data has found that Caribbean Black men have higher rates of major depression than African American men. The rate of major depression of Caribbean Black men is similar to that of Caribbean Black women and African American women (Williams, Gonzalez, Neighbors, Nesse, Abelson et al., 2007). Caribbean Black men were also found to have higher rates of suicide attempts than Caribbean Black women, African American women and African American men (Joe, Baser, Breeden, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2006). Although research almost uniformly has found that women have higher rates of negative interactions, depression and suicide attempts compared to men, this is not the case for Caribbean Blacks in the United States. These findings underscore the importance of research that examines within group variability among the vast number of minority populations in the United States. Although many of the relationships may be similar, current research indicates that there are often significant and important differences in social connections and relationships that are consequential for their mental health.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample and Distribution of Study Variables

	African Americans				Black Caribbeans			
	%	N	Mean	S.D.	%	N	Mean	S.D.
Gender								
Male	44.03	1271			50.87	643		
Female	55.97	2299			49.13	978		
Age		3570	42.33	14.50		1621	40.27	5.78
Family Income		3570	36833	33069		1621	47044	15190
Education		3570	12.43	2.23		1621	12.89	1.02
Marital Status								
Married	32.91	960			37.56	559		
Partnered	8.74	260			12.58	131		
Divorced	11.75	524			9.29	178		
Widowed	7.90	353			4.29	78		
Separated	7.16	286			5.37	128		
Never Married	31.55	1170			30.92	542		
Region								
Northeast	15.69	411			--	--		
Midwest	18.81	595			--	--		
South	56.24	2330			--	--		
West	9.25	234			--	--		
Foreign Born								
Born in USA	--	--			65.11	1166		
Born in Another Country	--	--			34.90	440		
Family Contact		3538	6.07	1.17		1609	5.87	0.47
Family Closeness		3537	3.64	0.58		1608	3.68	0.21
Emotional Support and Negative Interaction								
High Emotional Support and Low Negative Interaction	25.13	918			22.31	348		
High Emotional Support and High Negative Interaction	16.35	604			18.61	281		
Low Emotional Support and Low Negative Interaction	29.21	1021			27.48	492		
Low Emotional Support and High Negative Interaction	29.31	993			31.60	484		

Percents and N are presented for categorical variables and Means and Standard Deviations are presented for continuous variables. Percentages are weighted and frequencies are un-weighted

Table 2
Multinomial Logistic Regressions of the Four Patterns of Emotional Support and Negative Interactions among African Americans

	Model 1 High Emotional Support and High Negative Interaction (Ambivalent)		Model 2 Low Emotional Support and Low Negative Interaction (Estranged)		Model 3 Low Emotional Support and High Negative Interaction (Strained)	
	RRR	95% C.I.	RRR	95% C.I.	RRR	95% C.I.
Gender						
Male	-	-	-	-	-	-
Female	1.13	.82–1.55	.60***	.47–.76	.81	.65–1.02
Age	.98*	.97–.99	1.02**	1.01–1.03	1.00	.99–1.00
Family Income	1.00	1.00–1.00	1.00	1.00–1.00	1.00	1.00–1.00
Education	1.01	.96–1.06	1.02	.97–1.06	1.02	.97–1.07
Marital status						
Married	-	-	-	-	-	-
Partnered	1.70	.97–2.97	1.38	.91–2.10	1.13	.78–1.63
Divorced	1.07	.67–1.72	.87	.59–1.30	.71*	.51–1.00
Widowed	1.17	.66–2.07	.65	.41–1.04	.88	.53–1.48
Separated	1.15	.58–2.25	.88	.55–1.40	.78	.48–1.27
Never Married	.87	.59–1.29	.60**	.42–.85	.61**	.44–.86
Region						
Northeast	1.46*	1.01–2.09	1.18	.73–1.91	1.28	.84–1.95
Midwest	1.32	.98–1.79	1.05	.74–1.49	1.23	.86–1.76
West	.92	.51–1.65	.98	.51–1.91	1.24	.75–2.04
South	-	-	-	-	-	-
Family Closeness	1.02	.87–1.20	.76***	.68–.85	.86*	.76–.99
Family Contact	.39**	.23–.67	.18***	.11–.27	.10***	.07–.16
N				3,698		

Note: RRR= Relative Risk Ratio, C.I.=Confidence Intervals

* p<.05

** p<.01

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Table 3

Multinomial Logistic Regressions of the Four Patterns of Emotional Support and Negative Interactions among Black Caribbeans in the United States

Sociodemographic Variables	Model 1 High Emotional Support and High Negative Interaction (Ambivalent)		Model 2 Low Emotional Support and Low Negative Interaction (Estranged)		Model 3 Low Emotional Support and High Negative Interaction (Strained)	
	RRR	95% C.I.	RRR	95% C.I.	RRR	95% C.I.
Gender						
Male	-	-	-	-	-	-
Female	0.84	0.42 – 1.68	0.36**	0.19 – 0.68	0.39***	0.24 – 0.63
Age	0.97	0.95 – 1.00	1.01	0.97 – 1.05	1.00	0.98 – 1.03
Family Income	1.00	0.99 – 1.00	1.00	0.99 – 1.00	1.00	0.99 – 1.00
Education	0.95	0.85 – 1.05	1.01	0.87 – 1.19	1.02	0.87 – 1.20
Marital status						
Married	-	-	-	-	-	-
Partnered	0.35	0.10 – 1.20	0.22	0.04 – 1.21	0.62	0.07 – 5.12
Divorced	0.93	0.54 – 1.57	0.32*	0.11 – 0.92	0.41*	0.19 – 0.91
Widowed	0.88	0.10 – 7.98	0.54	0.07 – 3.92	0.75	0.26 – 2.15
Separated	0.36*	0.16 – 0.84	0.43	0.13 – 1.40	0.49	0.16 – 1.54
Never Married	1.06	0.47 – 2.39	0.56	0.20 – 1.57	1.01	0.39 – 2.61
Foreign Born						
USA	0.76	0.35 – 1.66	1.57	0.85 – 2.88	0.63	0.30 – 1.33
Foreign Country	-	-	-	-	-	-
Family Closeness	0.78*	0.62 – 0.97	0.68*	0.50 – 0.93	0.78	0.55 – 1.09
Family Contact	0.35*	0.14 – 0.89	0.10***	0.05 – 0.19	0.06***	0.03 – 0.13
N				1,588		

Note: RRR= Relative Risk Ratio, C.I.=Confidence Intervals

* p<.05

** p<.01

*** p<.001