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A Culture of Mutual Support: The Impact of Giving and Receiving of Practical and Emotional Support on African American Marital Satisfaction

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Abstract

While the literature has discussed the extensive family network ties of African Americans and its implications for marital satisfaction, few studies incorporate primarily African American samples in studies of marital satisfaction and social networks. This study draws on a sample of African American married couples from the National Survey of American Life and explores the impact of mutual support, giving and receiving of practical and emotional support, on the marital satisfaction of husbands and wives. Results from the ordinal logistic regression analyses reveal that emotional support received from family and support given to friends are significantly related to husbands' marital satisfaction while emotional support received from family and negative interaction with family contributes to wives' marital satisfaction. Research and practice implications with African American married couples are discussed.

Keywords

Marital Satisfaction; Reciprocity; Mutual Support; African Americans; Social Support Networks

Marital satisfaction is important for family wellbeing (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon & Roberts, 2005; Bradbury, Fincham & Beach; King & Allen, 2000). It has been suggested that social networks contribute to overall levels of marital satisfaction (Bryant, Conger & Meehan, 2001; Kearns & Leonard, 2004). For example, Burger & Milardo (1995) found that husbands and wives interactions with family and friends influenced marital satisfaction. Social networks are defined as informal relationships with family and friends (Gaudin & Davis, 1985; Jewell, 1988; Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch & Willets, 2002). Social networks are important to consider for African American married couples because research has indicated that mutual support, characterized by reciprocal giving and receiving of practical and emotional support, is a dominant theme in African American social networks (Gerstel, 2011; Hill, 2003; Taylor, Chatters, Woodward & Brown, 2013). Despite this fact, few studies of social networks and marital satisfaction include African Americans in their sample (Taylor, Brown, Chatters & Lincoln, 2012). Furthermore, studies tend to focus on

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married individuals or couple's receipt of support and its influence on marital satisfaction opposed to mutual support. The goal of this study is to contribute to the literature by investigating mutual support between married individuals and their extended family and friend networks and its impact on marital satisfaction. Specifically, this study incorporates gender comparisons to determine differences in the impact of mutual support variables on marital satisfaction. This study has implications for social workers engaging in marriage counseling.

Social Networks and Marital Satisfaction

Couples operate within a social context in which marriage is susceptible to the influence and pressures of their own and their spouses' social networks (Bryant, Conger & Meehan, 2001; Kearns & Leonard, 2004). Social networks provide various types of supports and have reciprocal psychological, social and economic benefits (Brown, Orbuch & Maharaj, 2010). Social networks offer positive supports which can increase married individual's self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Brown, Orbuch & Maharaj, 2010) and increase marital satisfaction by validating the marriage (Bryant & Conger, 1999). For example, Amiri et al. (2012) found that social support positively influences marital satisfaction among women with major depression disorder.

Despite the benefits of social networks, negative interaction with social network members (including relationships where mutual support is expected) could lead to conflict between network members, increase stressors (Brown, Orbuch & Maharaj, 2010) and contribute to the breakdown of the marital unit by fostering feelings of dissatisfaction (Bryant & Conger, 1999). In addition, couples who receive support from their networks without the expectation of reciprocity may experience decreased autonomy which may impact couple interaction and decrease marital satisfaction (Bryant, Wickrama, Bolland, Bryant, Cutrona & Stanik 2010). Furthermore, married persons with divorced individuals in their social networks may experience negative messages about marriage. For example, Wigel (2007) reported that young adults with divorced parents often received negative messages about marriages which influenced their own experiences in relationships.

The effects of social networks on marital satisfaction differ by gender. Burger and Milardo (1995) reported that husband's contact with kin, especially fathers, was tied to greater marital independence and lower conflict. For wives, contact with kin, especially brothers-in-law, was consistently associated with greater marital distress. Similarly, Bryant and Conger (1999) found that for wives, discord with fathers-in-law predicted perceptions of marital success at later time periods while husband's discord with father-in-law had no effect on husband's perception. In addition, Klein and Milardo (2000) reported that women would benefit from large social networks that are likely to contain many perceived supporters while men would benefit from small social networks that are likely to contain few perceived critics.

Coupled with gender differences, sources of support (family verses friend networks) may have differing impacts on marital satisfaction. Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) reported that, while family and friend networks were important in predicting the eventual survival of a

dating relationship, females' own friends' approval were more significant than that of family's approval. On the contrary, Burger and Milardo (1995) reported that wives with many kin had lower levels of marital satisfaction. Additionally, friendship of husbands had no impact on marital satisfaction; however, wives' frequency of interaction with friends was associated with greater marital conflict and ambivalence about the marriage for husbands.

In addition to gender differences and sources of support, interactions with social networks are dictated by cultural norms and expectations which may result in different outcomes of marital satisfaction by racial groups (Bryant et al., 2010), specifically for African Americans who have large social networks and in-depth family ties. For example, Timmer, Veroff and Hatchett's (1996) study of family ties and marital happiness among Black and White Couples found that close family ties had no effect on marital happiness of whites but significantly predicted marital happiness of Blacks. Similarly, a study by Taylor et al. (2013) reported that compared to non-Hispanic whites and Black Caribbeans, African Americans were more likely to provide support to extended family members as well as interact with family members on a daily basis. The assumption is that African Americans rely more on family during times of adversity, which reduces the need for marriage (Cherlin, 1998). Dixon (2009) echoes this assumption by suggesting that the cultural practice of prioritizing blood ties over marital ties and emphasizing the important role of extended family structure has a negative impact on Black marriages. In contrast, Staples and Johnson (2003) view social networks as a strength of African American families and argue that it is these extensive ties with social networks that have kept many marriages intact.

While the literature has discussed the extensive family network ties of African Americans and its implications for marital satisfaction, few studies incorporate primarily African American samples in studies of marital satisfaction and social networks. The exception is the study conducted by Taylor et al. (2012), who analyzed the impact of emotional support and negative interaction with extended family on relationship satisfaction of African Americans and Black Caribbeans. They reported that emotional support received from extended family was positively associated with relationship satisfaction while negative interaction with extended family was associated with lower relationship satisfaction.

Focus of the Present Study

Building on previous studies of social networks and marital satisfaction, this study seeks to understand the impact of social networks on marital satisfaction of African Americans. Specifically, this study seeks to determine how marital satisfaction is effected by several types of supports: (1) negative interaction with family, (2) emotional support received from family, (3) practical support given to family, (4) practical support received from family, (5) practical support given to friends, and (6) practical support received from friends. Similar to Taylor et al. (2012), this study assesses the effects of negative interaction with family and emotional support received from family but includes additional social network variables in order to emphasize mutual support. Specifically, this study seeks to analyze gender differences in social network predictors of marital satisfaction.

Method

The Data Source

This secondary data analysis utilized data from The National Survey of American Life (NSAL): Coping with Stress in the 21st Century. The data collected in this study includes information regarding mental disorders, psychological distress, and informal and formal service use. The focus was on presumed risk and protective factors of African Americans, Afro Caribbean and whites living in predominantly black communities (Alegria, Jackson, Kessler, & Takeuchi, 2007). The program for research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research directed the study.

The Sample

The NSAL has a national multistage probability design with African Americans being the core sample (Bryant et. al. 2008). The multi-stage probability design combined a 'core' national area probability sample of households with a special supplemental sample of households in areas of higher Afro-Caribbean residential density. The sample of the NSAL included African Americans (Black adults who didn't identify as having Caribbean ancestry ties), Afro Caribbean (Black adults who identified being of Caribbean ancestry), and White Americans (all Caucasian adults from predominantly Black neighborhoods who didn't identify as being of Hispanic ancestry) ages 18 and up residing in the coterminous United States. Individuals were excluded who were institutionalized, living on military bases, and were non-English speakers. The number of interviews included in the NSAL project were 6,082: 3,570 African Americans, 1,621 Afro Caribbeans, and 891 non-Hispanic Whites. All interviews were conducted face to face between 2001 and 2003 in the respondent's homes.

The focus of this current study is marital satisfaction among African Americans. The analysis included only individuals who identified as married/cohabitating and African American (N=1222). The sample consisted of 45% men and 55% women. The mean age was 43.43 years (SD =13.98). The mean household income was \$45, 837 (SD = \$33, 539). The mean education was 12.63 years (SD = 2.40).

Measures

In this study marital satisfaction is the dependent variable. The independent variables include: support given to family, support received from family, positive family support, negative family support, support given to friends, and support received from friends. The scale response for all independent variables originally ranged from 1 (very often) to 4 (Never). Responses of 1 (very often) and 2 (often) were collapsed to create one category, "often." Responses of 3 (not too often) and 4 (never) were collapsed to create one category, "not too often." The final categories included in analysis were "often" and "not too often." The control variables include: age, education and household income.

Dependent variable—Marital Satisfaction was assessed through the following question, "How satisfied are you with your current relationship?" The response categories ranged from 4 (very satisfied) to 1 (very dissatisfied). Single item instruments of marital satisfaction are common, especially when using national data sets (Amato, Booth, & Rogers, 2007;

Bryant et al., 2008) and have been found to yield results similar to multiple items measures (Bryant et al., 2008; Mitchell, 2010).

Independent variables—*Support given to family* was assessed through the following question, “How often do you help out family- including children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, in laws and so on?” The response categories included: often and not too often.

- a. *Support received from family* was assessed through the following question, “How often do people in your family help you out including children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, in-laws and so on?” (often or not too often).
- b. *Emotional support received from family* was assessed by the summation of three items: “Other than your spouse/partner, how often do your family members make you feel loved and cared for?”; “Other than your spouse/partner, how often do your family members listen to you talk about your private problems and concerns?”; and “Other than your spouse/partner, how often do family members express interest in your well-being?” The scale response ranged from 1 (very often) to 4 (Never). The Cronbach alpha for this measure was .70. The summed scores were collapsed into two categories, scores 3–6 were labeled “very often” and scores 9–12 were labeled “not too often.”
- c. *Negative interaction with family* was assessed by the summation of the following three items: “Other than your spouse/partner, how often do your family members make too many demands on you?”; “Other than your spouse/partner, how often do family members criticize you and the things you do?” and “Other than your spouse/partner, how often do your family members try to take advantage of you?” The scale response ranged from 1 (very often) to 4 (Never). The Cronbach alpha for this measure was .73. The summed scores were collapsed into two categories, scores 3–6 were labeled “very often” and scores 9–12 were labeled “not too often.”
- d. *Support given to friends* was assessed through the following question, “How often do you help out friends?” (often or not often)
- e. *Support received from friends* was assessed through the following question, “How often do your friends help you out?” (often or not often)

Control variables—Based on the literature, three control variables were included in this study. *Age* is a continuous variable measured in years. *Education* refers to the number of school years completed. *Income* refers to the annual household income.

Analysis Strategy

Ordinal logistic regression for complex samples was conducted to test the effects of giving and receiving types of support to and from family and friend networks on marital satisfaction. Two separate models, one for husbands and one for wives, were run. Both models controlled for age, education, and income. Analyses were performed using SPSS 21

and significant findings include variables with p -values less than .05. Unstandardized betas were calculated for each parameter estimate.

Results

Results from the ordinal logistic regression analyses revealed that emotional support received from family and support given to friends was significantly related to husbands' marital satisfaction (See Table 1). Specifically, husbands who reported receiving emotional support from family not too often ($B = -0.74$, $p < .01$) were less likely to be in satisfied marriages compared to husbands who report receiving emotional support from family often. Husbands who reported helping friends not too often were more likely to be in satisfied marriages compared to husbands who reported helping friends often. Negative interaction with family, support received from family, support given to family, and support received from friends did not significantly contribute to husbands' marital satisfaction.

Results from the ordinal logistic regression analyses demonstrate that positive family support and negative family support contributes to wives' marital satisfaction. Specifically, wives who reported receiving emotional support from family not too often ($B = -0.41$, $p < .05$) were less likely to be in satisfied marriages compared to wives who reported receiving emotional support from family often. Wives reporting negative interaction with family not too often ($B = 0.49$, $p < .05$) were more likely to be in satisfied marriages compared to wives reporting negative interaction with family often. Support received from family, support given to family, support received from friends, and support given to friends were not significant determinants of wives' marital satisfaction.

Discussion

Using data from the NSAL, the central aim of this study was to determine the effects of social networks on marital satisfaction among African American husbands and wives. This study is one of the few studies to assess the impact of family and friends on marital satisfaction using a primarily African American sample. Additionally, this study contributes to the literature by incorporating variables of giving and receiving of practical support to determine the impact of mutual aid, or reciprocity, on marital satisfaction. As a result these findings provide new information filling several gaps in the literature.

For both husbands and wives emotional support received from family was influential in determining marital satisfaction. Specifically, husbands and wives receiving emotional support from their family "often" compared to "not too often" reported higher levels of marital satisfaction. This mirrors findings which indicate that social networks offer positive supports which can increase married individual's self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Brown, Orbuch & Maharaj, 2010) and increase marital satisfaction by validating the marriage (Bryant & Conger, 1999). Furthermore, this finding is similar to Taylor et. al. (2012) who found that emotional support from extended family was positively associated with relationship satisfaction for married and cohabitating African Americans and Black Caribbeans.

Overall, while there were similarities, social network variables significant in predicting marital satisfaction differed for husbands and wives. This is not surprising and resonates with previous studies reporting gender differences (Bryant & Conger, 1999; Burger & Milardo, 1995; Klein & Milardo, 2000). It is likely that societal expectations for husbands and wives as well as biological differences resulted in contrasting social network predictors between the genders. As a result, husband and wives' levels of marital satisfaction were influenced by distinct social network variables.

For African American husbands, in addition to emotional support received from family, support given to friends "not too often" was associated with a satisfied marriage. This finding is in contrast to Burger and Milardo (1995) who reported that husband's friends had no impact on marital satisfaction. A possible explanation is that when husbands give support to friends "often," they also spend more time with friends, which may upset wives, increase marital conflict and decreases marital satisfaction. Furthermore, it has been suggested that spouses with interdependent social networks report higher levels of marital satisfaction (Stein, Bush, Ross & Ward, 1992). In our study, it could be that husband's friends are not friends of both the husband and the wife. This would mean that husbands who constantly give support to friends or spend time with friends may sacrifice time that could be spent with their wives. Another possible explanation is that these husbands were already unsatisfied in their marriages and as a result started to have more interaction with friends. In this study, wives giving support to friends were not a significant predictor of marital satisfaction.

In addition to emotional support received from family, negative interaction with family was a significant predictor of wives' marital satisfaction. Wives who reported negative interaction with their families "not too often" were more likely to be in a satisfied marriage. This finding is similar to Taylor et al. (2012), who reported that negative interaction with extended family decreased marital satisfaction for cohabitating and married African Americans and Black Caribbeans. It is important to note that in this study, however, negative interaction was not a significant predictor of husband's marital satisfaction. It is likely that wives internalize negative interaction with family which can increase stress and decrease marital satisfaction. It is also possible that more demands from extended family are made on wives instead of husbands resulting in negative interaction with family being a significant predictor of wives marital satisfaction verses husbands.

Lastly, with regard to mutual support, while giving to friends influenced marital satisfaction of husbands, receiving practical support from family and friends had no impact on husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction. Bryant et al. 2010 suggested that couples receiving support from their networks without the expectation of reciprocity may experience decreased autonomy which may impact couple interaction and decrease marital satisfaction (Bryant, Wickrama, Bolland, Bryant, Cutrona & Stanik 2010). A possible explanation is that practical support from family and friends were given without any strings attached. Married individuals were able to do whatever they wanted with the support they received which had little bearing on marital satisfaction. It should be noted that giving support to family did not impact husbands' or wives' marital satisfaction. It could be that husbands and wives expect each other to provide practical support to their families.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, marital satisfaction is measured by a single item scale which leads to concerns regarding validity. This is often the case when using national data sets to measure marital satisfaction. Second, this study does not incorporate the marital dyad. Instead, questions regarding marital satisfaction and social support networks are assessed with one of the individuals in a marriage, not both. This limits the understanding of how social networks impact both spouses. Third, the findings of this study are limited to heterosexual marriages and cannot be extended to same sex marriages. Fourth, because this study is cross-sectional in nature, causation cannot be implied.

Implications

The influence of family and friend networks on African American marital satisfaction has important implications for social work practitioners. Practitioners engaging in marriage counseling should assess couples' interactions with family and friends and its influence on marriage. Our findings demonstrate that family and friends can both negatively and positively impact marriages. Practitioners can help identify social supports among family and friends and determine the benefits or consequences of these relationships to the marriage. Similarly, practitioners engaging in marriage education should incorporate a discussion about the various ways family and friends can impact marriage. In addition, Healthy relationship education can assist couples in strategizing how to interact with family and friends in a way that's beneficial to their marriage and increases their life satisfaction. Specifically, practitioners should teach spouses how to carefully assess the relationship between family and friends, examine the potential impact of these relationships on their marriage and strategize ways to interact with their social networks that benefit the marriage.

Further, recognition of gender differences with regard to social networks and marital satisfaction should be considered. The findings of this study indicate clear differences in social network predictors of marital satisfaction. Specifically, giving support to friends influenced husbands' marital satisfaction but not wives', while negative interaction with family influenced wives' marital satisfaction but not husbands. During interventions with couples practitioners should convey to spouses that social networks impact husbands and wives differently. Moreover, practitioners should try to get spouses to understand each other's feelings regarding social networks and perceived impact on the marriage. Also, marriage education programs may want to include gender specific components in addition to co-educational curriculum.

In summary, the findings of this study contribute to the literature of social networks and marital satisfaction among African Americans. Relationships with family and friends, characterized by giving and receiving of supports, can both increase and decrease marital satisfaction of African American husbands and wives. To contribute to increased marital satisfaction, practitioners working with African American husbands and wives are advised to employ interventions that consider the influence of social network.

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Table 1

Summary of Ordinal Regression Logistic Analysis: Exploring the Relationship between Marital Satisfaction and the Giving and Receiving of Support, Family and Friend Support

Variables	Male		Female	
	B	SE	B	SE
Family Positive Support (ref, often)	−0.74	0.26 ^{**}	−0.41	0.19 [*]
Family Negative Support (ref, often)	0.52	0.48	0.49	0.22 [*]
Support received from family (ref, often)	−0.12	0.24	−0.11	0.24
Support given to family (ref, often)	0.02	0.27	0.22	0.27
Support received from friends (ref, often)	−0.04	0.25	−0.13	0.24
Support given to friends (ref, often)	0.51	0.26 [*]	−0.00	0.27

Note: Model controlled for age, education and household income

*
p .05;

**
P<.01, (N = 1222)