

# **FAMILY TIES AND MARITAL HAPPINESS: THE DIFFERENT MARITAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK AND WHITE NEWLYWED COUPLES**

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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the relationship of family ties to black and white couples' marital happiness over the first 3 years of their marriages. Respondents were 115 black and 136 white couples interviewed as part of the Early Years of Marriage study. Although there were many similarities in the way blacks and whites felt about and interacted with their families, black couples were less likely to argue over matters pertaining to family, visited their families more often but perceived fewer

family members able to help if needed. Hierarchical panel regressions showed that close family ties had no effect on the marital happiness of whites but significantly predicted black couples' marital happiness, particularly the ties to the husband's family. Predictions of marital happiness further varied by low and high structural stress (low income combined with early family formation), such that low-stress blacks' increased closeness to their in-laws from year 1 to year 3 predicted marital happiness. For high-stress blacks, the couple's closeness to the husband's family in year 1 and increases in that closeness by year 3 predicted increased marital happiness. Findings point to the importance of accounting for both ethnicity and structural context for understanding the paths couples take in establishing happy marriages.

**KEY WORDS** • extended family ties • marital adjustment • race differences

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The paths of young black and white adults have become increasingly divergent, particularly regarding marriage and childbearing. Between 1985 and 1989, 70 percent of black women, compared with 22 percent of white women, had their first child before marrying (US Bureau of the Census, 1991). The 1993 Census figures show approximately 29 percent of black vs 15 percent of white men and women under 35 years of age as divorced or separated (US Bureau of the Census, 1993). These data suggest that black women will be more likely to leave a marriage with children than will their white counterparts. Finally, there are data showing that blacks are less likely to marry: 63 percent of black men and women under 35 years of age had never married, compared with 41 percent of white men and women (US Bureau of the Census, 1993).

Such aggregate behavioral differences are almost certainly accompanied by dramatic differences for blacks in marital role expectations (Modell, 1980) and psychological issues that build and sustain new marriages. How does the experience in early marriage differ for black and white couples? In this paper we examine this question from a life-course perspective, with additional consideration of family development and family systems theories. We ask, in particular, how do families of origin contribute to a couple's marital happiness in the first 3 years of marriage and how that differs in black and white couples. The longitudinal nature of the data, combined with a high proportion of black families in our sample will permit us to examine potentially different paths that black newlywed couples follow in their early years compared with newlywed couples from the dominant white society.

The early years of marriage compose the first stage in family development when process norms — e.g. for sequencing and timing of children, independently managing finances and housing — operate within family and peer reference groups and according to larger societal expectations. These norms are powerful, affecting the way couples structure their marital relationship (Rodgers & White, 1993); however, the power of family norms over the offspring's behavior is contingent upon the strength of cultural norms for family closeness and on individual family ties. The strength of family ties lies in the quality of intrafamilial relationships.

Family systems theory proposes that during the early years of a marriage the couple must reorganize interactive patterns such as those with family members, friends and the new spouse. According to Minuchin (1974), one of the most important tasks newlyweds face is the creation of boundaries between their marital relationship and their relationships with their families. They must separate from each family of origin and negotiate a new relationship with parents, siblings and in-laws. Primary loyalties must shift from the family of origin to the spouse to establish a successful, intimate marital relationship. How is this accomplished?

Long years of membership in a family system produce deep psychological connections. The mechanics of detaching from the family of origin involve dramatic changes in family connectedness. At the same time, many years of socialization by the family determine, at a less overt level, the individual's ability to draw these boundaries.

A family systems approach views family members as interdependent, each contributing to patterns of social interaction within the family. Family members internalize these patterns and relationships over time. Upon marriage, each spouse carries certain valued patterns of social interaction into the new relationship. The couple's ability to establish functional patterns of interaction in their marriage depends largely on the 'health' of these internalized familial relationships (Minuchin, 1974).

Family systems theory points to the importance of family style in molding its members' orientation to and expectations of social relationships. Family style, first described as 'enmeshed vs disengaged' structures (Minuchin, 1974) and later described in dimensions like flexibility and cohesiveness (Olson et al., 1979), determines the ability of families of origin to adjust to the separation of one of its members, assimilate the new spouse into the family system and allow the newlyweds to incorporate the new spouse's family into his or her support network, even if it means that the son or daughter will spend less time with or need the family less. On the other hand, families nurturing close but insecure and anxious ties have more difficulty allowing this kind of transformation to take place (McGoldrick, 1980). When a family system is not flexible enough or when a new spouse is overly embedded in his or her family of origin, the couple will have more difficulty forging their new relationship (Olson et al., 1979).

Strong kinship ties have long been noted as a distinguishing characteristic of black families (e.g. Mutran, 1985; Raley, 1995). The interdependence of black family members and high frequency of contact described in these studies could be evidence of embeddedness, according to family systems theory. According to this theory, newly married black couples should have a more difficult time establishing their relationship independently of their families and consequently will be less happy in their marriages.

'Embeddedness', as it also has been called, has generally been considered as an asset (e.g. Dressler, 1985). Interdependence in the extended family structure of black Americans is described as a source of both psychological and instrumental support (Chatters & Taylor, 1993; Dressler, 1985) in the face of reduced financial resources, higher rates of unemployment, divorce, teenage pregnancy and racism. However, there is also empirical evidence that suggests that embeddedness in the extended family network can have psychological and material costs for black families. Research has cited such negative effects as feeling burdened by family obligations, disagreements over the need or use of family support, greater scrutiny and possibly disapproval of a new family's patterns or child-rearing practices (e.g. Rhodes et al., 1994). In other words, family members disagree over who has the power to decide the emergent family's course of action. This kind of dispute is expected in over-embedded families where clear boundaries between the responsibilities of the new couple and the family of origin have not been firmly established.

To sum, research asserts that the extended family is of greater importance to blacks than to whites, though this closeness brings both positive and negative consequences. We submit that the high value placed on the family

allows some blacks to benefit more from familial support than whites when forming new families. This value, however, also makes them more vulnerable to the effects of embeddedness in the family system, making it more difficult for some black newlywed couples to establish a relationship independently of their families of origin.

While family relationships may play a major role in the speed and success of black couples' adjustment to marriage, other structural factors about the lives of blacks may also play important roles in establishing a new marriage. A life-course perspective alerts us to the need to consider also the structural and historical contexts in which marriage occurs when evaluating differences in life paths (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). We will discuss four factors which are often cited in research literature as contextual conditions that directly affect marital adjustment: economic power, early family formation, intactness of family of origin and the impact of gender roles in American society. The first three are particularly important to our analyses because they also differentiate black and white families. Gender roles are always important to study as they intertwine with different meanings of marriage for men and women.

First, concerning *economic power*, blacks more than whites are subject to environmental stresses related to economic hardship. Black men are particularly vulnerable to unemployment due in part to lower educational attainment, lower and less transportable skills and institutional barriers in the market place (Buss & Redburn, 1983). Black women are increasingly likely to have children before marrying (70% of black women vs 22% of white women had their first child before marrying), which increases their likelihood of suffering economic hardship (McLoyd, 1990). Additionally, McLoyd (1990) suggests that institutional barriers conspire to preserve blacks' positions in poverty. Economic hardship and early family formation have both been connected with distress in the family of origin and marital disruption in the new family (e.g. Bishop, 1977).

One could hypothesize that economic hardship would foster dependence on a kinship network, making it even more difficult for low-income couples to disengage from their families and adjust to marriage. However, low-income blacks are less likely to receive instrumental support than high-income blacks (Mutran, 1985) and blacks, in general, are less likely to receive aid than whites (Raley, 1995). Researchers point to the effect of reciprocity norms limiting the exchange of support (e.g. Antonucci & Jackson, 1990), such that those with the greatest need may be the least likely to receive help because they cannot return the favor.

Individuals suffering economic hardship are not only less likely to receive instrumental support, they are less likely to find social support helpful. Dressler (1985) found that support has a greater moderating effect on stress when the source of stress was an event rather than a chronic condition. Consistent with these findings, Riley & Eckenrode (1986) presented data showing that support related to negative well-being in women with low economic resources. Support, for them, became the 'tie that binds'. Vaux (1988) found that support could be burdensome for those with low in-

comes. When overwhelmed by stressful events and situations, they found it more difficult to maintain and use a helpful network.

Economic hardship may thus increase stress in the family and reduce the availability of resources to help couples cope with stress. Although there is no evidence that economic hardship reduces family contact or lowers valuation of family relationships, it has been found that women who had children before marrying were less likely to live with, have contact with or receive help from their families (Raley, 1995). Even teenage mothers, who may be more dependent on their family's help than the 19–29-year-old respondents in Raley's sample and therefore less likely to admit problems in their families, reported their mothers as overly controlling in the support they offered (Panzarine, 1986). We infer from these data that early family formation may have a more complicated meaning for women than its strong association with low economic power would lead us to believe. Early family formation may be an expression of a need for establishing a new family environment. Under these circumstances, disengagement from their family of origin may be critical to the new couple's marital happiness. In other words, wives stressed by income concerns and by the care of a child when newly married may be more likely than those not stressed by these concerns to adjust to their new marriage by disengaging from their families of origin.

Second, what is the importance of the *structure of the family of origin* for supporting new marriages? The structural characteristics of an individual's family history, like an intact family background, may affect attitudes towards family and consequently a couple's speed of adjustment to marriage. Studies of long-term effects of divorce on family relationships have documented poor relations with the non-custodial parent, particularly when the non-custodial parent is a father. Zill et al. (1993) re-examined data from the National Survey of Children and found that youths from 'disrupted' families were twice as likely to have poor relationships with both parents, not just with the father. The effect of divorce on mother-child relationships was not manifest until adulthood. Interestingly, White (1992) found that parental divorce decreased the flow of social, financial and instrumental support from parents to offspring and remarriage did not improve this flow of support. She suggested that reduced support resulted from reductions in parent-child solidarity rather than decreased parental resources.

Young blacks are more likely than whites to come from female-headed households. Ten years ago, black children were more than three times as likely (53%) as children from other races (17%) to live in female-headed households (US Bureau of the Census, 1985). Many of these were homes where the parental bond had been severed. Previous literature, mostly confined to white samples, leads us to believe that because of poor parent-child relations, divorce will decrease the likelihood of embeddedness in families. However, we expect the strong cultural traditions of family solidarity among blacks to neutralize the negative impact of divorce or separation on their family ties. Thus, a non-intact family background should affect blacks less than white newlyweds' adjustment to marriage.

Finally, we should be aware of sex differences in the meaning of family

support for new marriages. Komarovsky suggested in 1950 that asymmetry in western kinship systems made it more difficult for women than for men to separate from their families of origin. Similarly, Chodorow (1978) noted that socialization practices create a dependency between successive generations of women. Girls' socialization, stressing affective relationships with others, is intertwined with their family relationships, making it difficult for them to adjust to extrafamilial roles. Caspi & Elder (1988) showed that early patterns of instability replicated themselves in women's later relationships, affecting levels of marital discord and their partner's happiness. Chatters & Taylor (1993), finding lower levels of support in widowed than in married black men but no differences in similar groups of women, concluded that wives and women family members constitute an important link and source of cohesion in families. The cumulative body of research suggests that women are more tightly enmeshed in their families of origin than men and that it may take longer for women to adjust to being married than for men. It also suggests that women have substantial control over the viability of family relationships. Because of this, we expect the women's relationship to her family and perhaps to her in-laws to be more important predictors of the newly married couple's happiness and adjustment than her husband's relationship.

Considering the evidence on many aspects of elements generating black and white newlyweds' adjustment to marriage, we make the following general hypotheses:

- (1) The value placed on the family makes blacks more vulnerable to embeddedness in the family system than whites, which will make it more difficult for black newlywed couples to establish their relationship independent of their families of origin. Thus we hypothesize that blacks' marital happiness will be directly connected with their ability to disengage from their families of origin, more so than whites.
- (2) Both black and white couples' ability to adjust to their new marriages is further influenced by their structural and historical context in the following ways:
  - (a) Wives stressed by income concerns, who have had a child before marrying will be more likely than others to use marriage as a way to disengage from their families of origin.
  - (b) We expect that the negative effects of divorce on family relationships will be neutralized by strong cultural traditions of family solidarity in black households and thus have a lesser effect on black than on white newlyweds' adjustment to marriage.
  - (c) We expect women's, more than men's, relationships to family and in-laws to be important predictors of the newly married couple's happiness and adjustment, for both black and white couples.

The report is based on analyses of data from the first 3 years of the Early Years of Marriage study. These were collected by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan from 1986 to 1988 to determine the

precursors of marital well-being and instability among black and white newlywed couples.

### Method

In 1986, 373 couples (199 black, 174 white) were interviewed in their homes 3–7 months after they were married. These couples were selected from a list of all couples applying for marriage licenses in Wayne County, Michigan during a 3-month period (April–June 1986). None had previously married and the wives were all 35 years or younger. All marriages were intraracial. Of these eligible couples, 66 percent of white couples and 65 percent of black couples agreed to participate in the study.

For purposes of investigating the processes involved in reorganizing family ties, only respondents who remained in the study for 3 years are included in the following analyses. From the first to the third year of the study, 29 percent of couples dropped out of the study, leaving a total of 264 couples. The third year interview occurred 27–31 months after the date of marriage.

Black couples dropped out at nearly double the rate of white couples (39% vs 17%) from the first to the third year. Blacks divorced at a higher rate than whites: 17 percent of blacks in the original sample divorced or separated by 1988, compared with 8 percent of whites. This accounts for part of the difference in attrition. However, the whereabouts of 22 percent of the original sample of blacks compared with 10 percent of whites could not be traced. Many left without any forwarding address and many also resisted being interviewed.

The couples who dropped out of the study in the first 2 years were significantly less well educated than those who remained in the study and the husband was more likely to have come from a non-intact family. Black couples who dropped out were more likely to have lower household incomes and to have had a child before marrying.

In spite of slightly diminishing differences between black and white respondents from the first to the third year of the study, significant differences between black and white couples' likelihood of early family formation, coming from an intact family and household income evident in year 1 still existed in year 3.

Each year of the study, information was collected concerning the quality of the couples' relationships with their families and friends; areas of conflict and how the couples resolved them; perceptions of their marital, parental and work role behavior; the quality of their marriages along different dimensions; and their general psychological well-being. Information was collected in standard survey research, face-to-face interviews in the first and third years of the study and in telephone interviews in the second and fourth years. Interviewers were all women of the same race as the respondent. The bulk of the questions concerning the respondent's relationship with in-laws and family of origin was asked in the first and third years. For this reason and because of the procedural similarities of these 2 years of data collection, we limit our analyses to data collected in the first and third years.

All but two measures used in this study are couple measures, based on the sums of husbands' and wives' responses. While we recognize that husbands and wives sometimes have different perceptions of family relationships, we chose to combine the husband's and wife's views into a binocular, 'couple's view' of a particular relationship. This allowed us to focus on the couple's relationships

rather than on the peculiarities of the husband's or wife's view of relationships. This position would not be justified if men and women showed strong differences in the meaning they attached to various aspects of extended family relationships. However, preliminary analyses showed sizeable and significant correlations between the husband's and the wife's view of a particular relationship. The average correlation between items relating to family relationships was .50; between items measuring time spent and help received from husband's vs wife's family, .41; and between items measuring the incidence of marital differences because of family relations, .36. The correlations between the husband's and wife's judgment of the number of family members available to help each year was slightly lower. As a further check on the advisability of computing dyadic variables, we replicated some of the analyses presented in this study predicting marital happiness using separate husband and wife responses. Every significant effect appearing in the analyses using separate estimates of husbands and wives also emerged as significant in analyses using combined variables and every significant effect appearing in the combined variable analyses also appeared as significant in either the analysis using the husband's or the wife's responses.

*Measures of closeness to family* asked how close respondents felt to their own and their spouse's families and how close they thought their spouse felt to each family. These measures are our primary indicators of the strength of familial bonds. The first two questions most directly measure husbands' and wives' affective feelings for their families of origin. The latter two questions measure successful integration of each respondent into their in-law's family system.

*Measures of family conflict* record whether the newly married couple had problems in their relationship because of extended-family dynamics. Of the respondents who have had problems, many say that their differences resulted from tension between the spouse and his or her in-laws (e.g. the in-laws did not approve of the spouse or were critical of him or her).

Measures indicating *balance of family involvement* (whose family is more involved with the emergent family both in supportiveness and time spent together) were reconstructed as dummy variables. We created two dummy variables from a categorical variable indicating which family the new couple is more likely to approach for help or advice (own family, both equally, spouse's family). One variable separated respondents who said the wife's family helped most (i.e. the husband's family rarely helped) from all others; the second variable separated those who said the husband's family helped (i.e. the wife's family rarely helped) from the rest. The variable measuring whose family the couple spends most of their time with was similarly transformed.

*Perceived support* was measured by asking respondents to estimate the number of family members who could be called on for help or advice. The measure did not specify 'family of origin' but allowed respondents to include in-laws in their estimation, if they perceived them as family members.

Estimations of *contact with family* were made in year 3 only but are included as a means of verifying 'balance of involvement'. They ask the respondent to estimate how often they visit or have contact with their own families and their in-laws — whether together with their spouses or by themselves.

The following measures are left at the individual spouse level, not combined with the husband's or wife's response: the *propinquity of the family* is measured only in year 3. We include this variable to determine whether the balance of interaction with one family over the other is simply a function of nearness to the family. In this study, *marital happiness* is regarded as a reflection of husbands'



and wives' adjustment to marriage. It is viewed as the positive result of having accustomed oneself to the behavioral patterns and psychological needs of a spouse, having established the boundaries of the marital relationship and having shifted loyalties to place the spouse's needs before the needs of the family of origin.

Couples answered questions about the quality of their marital relationship in each interview. Based on their responses, Crohan & Veroff (1989) distinguished four dimensions of overall marital well-being: happiness, equity, control and marital role competence. Of the four, they found 'marital happiness' to be the most significant predictor of marital instability. It accounted for the most variance in a factor analysis (with oblique rotation) of all items in the study that reflected any evaluation of marital well-being and it had the highest correlation with the other factors that emerged in the factor analyses. The resulting scale consisted of five items and had an alpha coefficient of internal consistency of 0.82. The correlation between husbands' and wives' marital happiness in year 1 was  $r = .45, p < .0001$ ; in year 3 the correlation was  $r = .59, p < .0001$ .

We used income, intact family background and early family formation as *control variables* in multivariate analyses to assess the impact of family relations on marital happiness and investigate the relative contribution of culture vs structure on family connectedness. *Household income*, as reported by husbands, divides respondents into four annual income groups: less than US\$10,000; US\$10–20,000; US\$20–30,000; and more than US\$30,000. *Intact family background* distinguishes between respondents who lived with both parents at least until age 16 and those who did not. Therefore respondents who never grew up with their fathers were mixed with those whose parents divorced or separated. This variable better describes the advantages of living with two parents rather than the effects of parents' divorce on newlyweds. The variable '*parental status*' divides respondents into two groups: those with no children at the time of the first interview and those who had children by the time of the first interview and therefore conceived premaritally.

## Results

Most of the newlywed husbands and wives in the sample reported feeling very close to their families. In the first year, 76 percent of couples said that wives were 'very close' (both husband and wife responded 'very close'); and 60 percent said husbands were 'very close' to their families. In the third year, 70 percent of wives and 55 percent of husbands were 'very close' to their families.

Spouses reported getting along fairly well with in-laws, though they were not as close to their in-laws as they were to their own families. In the first year of their marriages, 28 percent of women and men were 'very close' to their spouses' families. Similar distributions for this variable appeared in the third year of data collection, with approximately 24 percent of wives and 26 percent of husbands feeling very close to their in-laws.

The descriptive results showed a strong dependence of newlyweds on their own families for support. Most husbands and wives said that, as a couple, they would seek help from their own families rather than from their spouse's families. Also, couples perceived their families as dependable sources of support. When asked how many family members the couple could call on for help or advice, about half the sample answered 'many' in both years 1 and 3.

**TABLE 1**  
**Results of repeated measures analysis of variance of measures of family connectedness by year of interview and race<sup>a</sup>**

	Year 1		Year 3		Race	Time	Race × time
	White	Black	White	Black			
<i>Closeness to family<sup>b</sup></i>							
Wife close to wife's family	7.6	7.7	7.6	7.6	NS	NS	$F(1,241) = 4.7^*$
Husband close to husband's family	7.3	7.4	7.1	7.4	$F(1,240) = 4.5^*$	NS	NS
Wife close to husband's family	6.5	6.5	6.3	6.4	NS	$F(1,241) = 4.7^*$	NS
Husband close to wife's family	6.5	6.7	6.5	6.6	NS	NS	NS
<i>Conflict<sup>c</sup></i>							
Differences with wife's family	3.2	3.3	3.3	3.6	$F(1,242) = 4.0^*$	$F(1,242) = 19.4^{***}$	NS
Differences with husband's family	3.1	3.4	3.3	3.6	$F(1,242) = 12.8^{***}$	$F(1,242) = 14.2^{***}$	NS
<i>Balance of interaction with families<sup>d</sup></i>							
Wife's family primarily helps	2.5	2.7	2.6	2.7	NS	NS	NS
Husband's family primarily helps	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.5	NS	NS	NS
Spends time with wife's family	2.8	2.8	2.9	2.8	NS	NS	NS
Spends time with husband's family	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.5	NS	NS	NS
<i>Perceived support<sup>e</sup></i>							
Number of family members that can help × husband's & wife's family	7.0	6.0	6.7	5.6	$F(1,242) = 65.8^{***}$	$F(1,242) = 17.3^{***}$	NS
<i>Contact with family<sup>f</sup></i>							
Frequency couple visits R's family							
Wife	—	—	5.1	4.3	$F(1,241) = 8.1^{**}$		
Husband	—	—	5.7	5.2	$F(1,242) = 3.1^{\dagger}$		
<i>Frequency R visits family of origin<sup>g</sup></i>							
Wife	—	—	1.9	1.6	$F(1,246) = 3.75^*$		
Husband	—	—	2.7	2.0	$F(1,241) = 18.3^{***}$		

*Notes*

<sup>a</sup> Except where noted, scores representing summed responses of husband and wife.

<sup>b</sup> Scores: 2 = not at all close; 4 = not too close; 6 = fairly close; 8 = very close.

<sup>c</sup> Scores: 2 = perceived conflict; 4 = no perceived conflict.

<sup>d</sup> Scores: 2 = spends more time with/would call both or other family for help; 4 = spends more time with/would call husband's or wife's family for help.

<sup>e</sup> Scores: 2 = none; 4 = one or two; 6 = some; 8 = many.

<sup>f</sup> Scores: 2 = several times a week; 4 = once a week; 6 = 2–3 times a week; 8 = about once a month; 10 = a few times a year; 12 = never. R = respondent.

<sup>g</sup> Scores are uncombined responses of husband and wife: 1 = several times a week; 2 = once a week; 3 = 2–3 times a month; 4 = about once a month; 5 = a few times a year; 6 = never.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Despite the preference for their own family for help, couples were more likely to spend time with the wife's family than with the husband's family: 29 percent of couples said they primarily spent time with the wife's family compared with 14 percent who said they primarily spent time with the husband's family. By the third year of marriage, 34 percent said they spent time primarily with the wife's family and 16 percent said they primarily spent time with the husband's family. Furthermore, in the third year of data collection, 82 percent of wives and 60 percent of husbands reported visiting or contacting their families by themselves at least once a week and 62 percent of wives and 47 percent of husbands said they also went with their spouses at least once a week to visit their families. Couples did not live any closer to the wife's than to the husband's family: 75 percent of both husbands and wives said they lived 'close by' their families. These data suggest that couples are more involved with wives' families than husbands' families over the first several years of marriage but not because of any greater proximity to them.

Table 1 presents the mean values of measures of family connectedness for black and white couples and the results of repeated measures analyses of variance: *F* and *p* values for main effects for race, time and interactions of race and time.

Results showed that, on the whole, blacks and whites felt similarly close to their parents and in-laws, although on average black husbands claimed to be closer to their families than did white husbands. Additionally, black women reported being slightly less close to their families in year 3, while white women reported similar levels of closeness at the two time-points.

Black couples perceived their relationships with their families as considerably less conflict-ridden than did white couples. Both black and white couples, however, were less likely to argue about issues pertaining to their families in the third year than the first. White couples believed more family members were available to help than did black couples. However, the passing of time had the effect of diminishing both black and white couples' perceptions of the numbers of family members available to help. Black and white couples showed a similar balance of involvement in their own vs their spouses' families, with regard to the time they spent with them and the support received from them. The large majority expected their family of origin to help when needed.

Analyses of variance of how often husbands and wives visited their families and in-laws (measured in year 3 only) showed strong differences between blacks and whites. Black women and men said they visited their families more often than white women and men — together with their husbands and alone. However, blacks were not any more likely to live closer to their families than whites, though black women showed a tendency to live closer to their families than white women ( $F(1,245) = 3.1; p < .10$ ).

The results of analyses of measures of closeness to family (see Table 2) show intercorrelations between measures of husbands' and wives' closeness to family and in-laws and the measures of family connectedness. The purpose of these analyses is to determine whether the measures of closeness to family have different meanings for black and white husbands and wives.

The occurrence of disagreements and tension in white couples' marriages over issues relating to the family of origin is significantly related to alienation from them. Among black couples, no such significant relationship exists. In contrast, disagreements and tension over issues relating to in-laws strongly related to both black and white husbands' and wives' feelings of closeness to that

**TABLE 2**  
**Correlations between closeness to family and measures of family connectedness**

	<b>Wife close to wife's family</b>				<b>Wife close to husband's family</b>			
	<b>Year 1</b>		<b>Year 3</b>		<b>Year 1</b>		<b>Year 3</b>	
	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>
<i>Conflict</i>								
Disagree over wife's family	.20*	.09	.25**	.11	-.001	.20*	.06	.15
Disagree over husband's family	-.21**	-.10	-.06	-.03	.23**	.50****	.50****	.39****
<i>Balance of interaction</i>								
Wife's family helps	.23**	.19*	.22**	.11	-.30***	-.31***	-.40***	-.36****
Spends time wife's family	.24**	.23**	.16†	.23**	-.42****	-.25**	-.50***	-.28**
Husband's family helps	-.33****	-.42***	-.30***	-.43****	.16†	.15†	.18*	.10
Spends time husband's family	-.40****	-.30***	-.25**	-.29**	.20*	.23**	.28**	.24**
<i>Perceived support</i>								
No. of family members to help	.19*	.16†	-.12	-.10	.15†	.13	.21*	.36****
<i>Contact with family</i>								
Freq. both visit wife's family			.26**	.20*			-.03	.15
Freq. wife visits family			.38****	.19*			-.03	-.09
Freq. both visit husband's family			-.15†	-.12			.55****	.47****
Physical proximity to wife's family			-.06	.02			-.08	.06
Physical proximity to husband's family			.04	-.09			.06	.13
<i>Closeness</i>								
Wife close to husband's family	-.01	-.02	-.07	-.04	—	—	—	—
Husband close to family	-.09	-.07	-.06	-.01	.64****	.54****	.66****	.39***
Husband close to wife's family	.58****	.44****	.63****	.35***	.04	.25**	.07	.28**
<b>Husband close to husband's family</b>				<b>Husband close to wife's family</b>				
<b>Year 1</b>		<b>Year 3</b>		<b>Year 1</b>		<b>Year 3</b>		
<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	
<i>Conflict</i>								
Disagree over wife's family	.03	.14	.02	-.04	.27***	.39****	.37****	.27**
Disagree over husband's family	.20*	.14	.23**	.18†	-.16†	.04	-.004	-.02
<i>Balance of interaction</i>								
Wife's family helps	-.33****	-.33***	-.39****	-.30***	.31***	.05	.23**	.06
Spends time wife's family	-.37****	-.31***	-.42****	-.24**	.30***	.17†	.21*	.19*
Husband's family helps	.14†	.10	.30***	.18†	-.42***	-.19*	-.26**	-.31***
Spends time husband's family	.24**	.30***	.30***	.21*	-.43***	-.17†	-.29***	-.25**
<i>Perceived support</i>								
No. of family members to help	.10	-.003	.18*	.27**	.19*	.17†	.23**	.09

**TABLE 2 (continued)**  
**Correlations between closeness to family and measures of family connectedness**

	Husband close to husband's family				Husband close to wife's family			
	Year 1		Year 3		Year 1		Year 3	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
<i>Contact with family</i>								
Frequency both visit husband's family			.50***	.27**			.04	.19*
Frequency husband visits family			.33****	.26**			.16†	.05
Frequency both visit wife's family			-.03	-.02			.49****	.34****
Physical proximity to husband's family			.08	.08			.18*	-.06
Physical proximity to wife's family			.04	-.05			.16†	-.11
<i>Closeness</i>								
Husband close to wife's family	.07	.10	-.12	.03	—	—	—	—
Wife close to family	-.09	-.02	-.06	-.01	.58****	.44****	.63****	.35****
Wife close to husband's family	.64****	.54****	.66****	.39****	.04	.25**	.07	.28**

† $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < .0001$ .

family. These findings suggest an impervious quality of blacks' relationships to their families of origin that does not exist for whites.

The closer black and white husbands and wives feel to their families, the more likely they are to feel they are likely to receive help from and spend time with them. The even stronger negative correlation between closeness to one's own family and primarily spending time with or being helped by one's in-laws indicates that when men and women say they are close to their family, they are not spending all their time with their spouse's family. They are spending at least some time or receiving some help from their family of origin.

White couples' estimates of the number of family members available to help them correlated with their closeness to the wife's family in year 1 and the husband's family in year 3. Black couples' estimates of the amount of familial support related only to closeness to the husband's family in year 3. This may reflect a shift in the predominance of the husband's family in both black and white couples' lives.

Frequency of contact in year 3 related strongly to blacks' and whites' closeness to both their own families and their in-laws. However, physical proximity to one's family was generally unrelated to measures of closeness, with one exception. The closer to their own families white men lived, the closer they were to the wife's family.

Intercorrelations of measures of closeness revealed an interesting difference between black and white couples. Whereas measures of husbands' and wives' closeness to a particular family were strongly correlated among both blacks and whites, only among blacks were measures of closeness to each other's in-laws significantly related. In other words, the closer the wife was to her husband's family, the closer the husband was to his wife's family and vice versa. These findings suggest various explanations: (1) mutual modeling of relationships to in-laws; (2) a reciprocal exchange of closeness to each other's family (i.e. you be nice to my family and I'll be nice to yours); or (3) a selection of a partner who has similar attitudes about the importance of family.

**TABLE 3**  
**Results of panel regressions: reciprocal influence of**  
**husbands' and wives' feelings for family and in-laws**

White respondents		Black respondents	
Year 1	Year 3	Year 1	Year 3
Husband close to family	Husband close to family N = 130 R <sup>2</sup> = .30	Husband close to family	Husband close to family N = 113 R <sup>2</sup> = .21
	.44****		.40****
Wife close to husband's family	Wife close to husband's family N = 132 R <sup>2</sup> = .28	Wife close to husband's family	Wife close to husband's family N = 115 R <sup>2</sup> = .22
	.49****		.51****
	.19* .09		.11 -.10
Wife close to family	Wife close to family N = 132 R <sup>2</sup> = .33	Wife close to family	Wife close to family N = 112 R <sup>2</sup> = .25
	.55****		.47****
Husband close to wife's family	Husband close to wife's family N = 130 R <sup>2</sup> = .35	Husband close to wife's family	Husband close to wife's family N = 113 R <sup>2</sup> = .10
	.52****		.35****
	.05 .15*		-.05 -.10
Husband close to wife's family	Husband close to wife's family N = 129 R <sup>2</sup> = .34	Husband close to wife's family	Husband close to wife's family N = 113 R <sup>2</sup> = .10
	.58****		.31****
Wife close to husband's family	Wife close to husband's family N = 131 R <sup>2</sup> = .27	Wife close to husband's family	Wife close to husband's family N = 115 R <sup>2</sup> = .21
	.52****		.46****
	.05 .05		-.11 .00

† p < .10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*\*p < .0001.

Note: Coefficients are standardized betas.

In order to explore further the reciprocal effects of husbands' and wives' familial affect, we performed two-wave, two-variable cross-lagged panel correlation analyses using ordinary least squares regression separately for blacks and whites. Because we were specifically interested in the influence of one spouse upon another, we used separate statements of husbands' and wives' closeness to their families and in-laws rather than summed scores in these analyses. As Table 3 indicates, interesting findings emerged.

First, among white couples, the wife's feeling for both her and her husband's family predicted her husband's statement of closeness to these families; however, among black husbands and wives only the auto-correlations were significant. A black husband's closeness to his own family was not related to his wife's closeness to his family. This suggests that black couples keep feelings about their families intact, seemingly impervious to any conflict between their spouses and their families.

Second, the relationship between black husbands' and wives' closeness to their in-laws did not extend across time, using any combination of husbands' and wives' responses (or even using summed scores). Neither the husband's closeness to the wife's family nor the wife's closeness to the husband's family in year 1 predicted levels of closeness to in-laws in year 3.

To estimate the longitudinal effects of family relationships on couples' *marital happiness*, we performed hierarchical regressions using a panel model. At each step we tested the significance of the increase in variance accounted for by the more unrestricted model. In the first step, we entered the year 1 measure of marital happiness. The second step added the control variables to the equations; and the third step, the measure of closeness to family. The third step was performed in two stages to avoid problems of multicollinearity. The first stage included measures of closeness to the family of origin and changes in closeness from year 1 to year 3, thereby controlling for simultaneous effects of changes on the dependent variables. The second stage added measures of closeness to in-laws and measures of change in these variables. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 4.

Increases in a black husband's closeness to his own family from year 1 to year 3 significantly predicted both his and his wife's marital happiness in year 3. Corresponding coefficients for white husbands and wives were negligible.

The measures of closeness to in-laws in equations predicting year 3 marital happiness again distinguished black from white couples. Marital happiness in black couples was predicted by the wife's closeness to her husband's family in year 1 and increases in closeness from year 1 to year 3. In contrast, white men's marital happiness was not connected to ties with in-laws and white women's marital happiness was only marginally predicted by these ties. As hypothesized, intact family background predicted happiness in white but not in black men and women. We did not expect husbands' intact family background to relate negatively to happiness, even though this coefficient was not statistically significant until measures of familial affect were included in the analysis.

These findings imply that movement by the wives towards their husbands' families affirms the wife as a member of her husband's family and is thus an important commitment to the marriage. The development of close relations between the wife and the husband's family may be particularly meaningful for black couples, as the women bear the double weight of socialization to value close family relationships both as women and as blacks. But are close family relationships more critical contributors to the marital adjustment of couples living in stressful contexts than they are to those whose lives are less stressful?

To test the hypothesis that couples living in stressful circumstances show a different pattern of adjustment to marriage than those less stressed, we performed panel regressions separately for black and white husbands and wives who were living under high and low stress. Highly stressed couples were defined as all who earned less than US\$10,000 a year or those who had a baby and earned less than US\$30,000 a year. Less stressed couples were childless upon

**TABLE 4**  
**Results of longitudinal regression analyses: predicting year 3 marital happiness:**  
**by sex and race**

	Predicting wives' marital happiness							
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3A		Step 3B	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Happiness, year 1	.37****	.38****	.34****	.30**	.37****	.30**	.35****	.18†
Intact family background			-.21**	.02	-.21*	-.07	-.20*	.002
Household income			-.01	.08	-.02	.08	-.03	.05
Parental status, year 1			-.08	-.11	-.08	-.11	-.08	-.16†
Wife close to family					.02	-.14		
Increase: wife close to family					.06	-.02		
Husband close to family					-.05	.29*		
Increase: husband close family					-.09	.38**		
Wife close to husband's family							-.02	.43****
Increase: wife close to husband's family							.16†	.46****
Husband close to wife's family							.17†	.003
Increase: husband close to wife's family							.06	.02
Significance of difference in	$R^2 = .14$ $N = 143$	.14	.21 $p < .01^a$	.15 $NS^a$	.24 $p < .05^b$	.24 $p < .01^b$	.28 $p < .01^b$	.34 $p < .01^b$

	Predicting husbands' marital happiness							
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3A		Step 3B	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Happiness, year 1	.35****	.35****	.36****	.36****	.38****	.35****	.34****	.23*
Intact family background			.11	.10	.18*	.09	.17*	.01
Household income			-.10	-.02	-.07	-.04	-.04	-.04
Parental status, year 1			-.22**	-.14	-.24**	-.17†	-.28****	-.18†
Wife close to family					.02	-.02		
Increase: wife close to family					.18†	.02		



**TABLE 4 (continued)**  
**Results of longitudinal regression analyses: predicting year 3 marital happiness:**  
**by sex and race**

	Predicting husbands' marital happiness							
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3A		Step 3B	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Husband close to family					.01	.07		
Increase: husband close to family					.11	.29*		
Wife close to husband's family							.14	.22*
Increase: wife close to husband's family							.02	.27*
Husband close to wife's family							-.01	.11
Increase: husband close to wife's family							.10	.16
Significance of difference in	$R^2 =$	$R^2 =$	$R^2 =$	$R^2 =$	$R^2 =$	$R^2 =$	$R^2 =$	$R^2 =$
	.12	.12	.19	.18	.26	.23	.25	.26
			$p < .01^a$	$p < .01^a$	$p < .01^b$	$p < .05^b$	$p < .01^b$	$p < .01^b$
	$N = 140$	120	136	113	125	106	125	106

Note: Coefficients are standardized betas.

†  $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < .0001$ .

<sup>a</sup> Difference between Steps 1 and 2.

<sup>b</sup> Difference between Steps 2 and 3.

marriage and earned more than US\$10,000 a year or those who earned more than \$30,000 a year whether or not they had a child premaritally.

The resulting variable related strongly negatively to income ( $r = -.69$ ) and positively to parental status ( $r = .70$ ) and was also significantly correlated with race ( $r = .32, p < .0001$ ), wife's intact family background ( $r = .30, p < .0001$ ), husband's intact family background ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ) and with the wife's alienation (closeness) from her family, particularly in year 3 (year 1:  $r = -.12, p < .10$ ; year 3:  $r = -.22, p < .001$ ).

Table 5 shows the results of a hierarchical regression of year 3 happiness on intact family background and measures of closeness to family of origin and in-laws for black low and high stress and white low stress husbands and wives. There were 15 white couples in the high-stress category—too small a number for a regression analysis using seven independent variables. Sample sizes of the black couples in the low- and high-stress categories are also small, reducing the reliability of these findings. The consistency of the relationships across husbands and wives, however, lends them some strength.

Findings revealed differences between black and white couples in the low-stress category and also differences between black couples in low- and high-stress categories. Similar to the comparisons of predictions of black and white couples' happiness noted earlier, the black husband's closeness to his own family (see Table 4, Step 3A) significantly predicted both his and his wife's marital

**TABLE 5**  
**Results of longitudinal regression analyses: predicting year 3 marital happiness: by sex, race and level of stress**

	Predicting wives' marital happiness												
	Step 1		Step 2				Step 3A				Step 3B		
	White	Black	White	Black	High	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	High	Black
Happiness, year 1	.44****	.35****	.41****	.35***	.29†	.45****	.38***	.46****	.33***				
Wife's intact family background													
Husband's intact family background													
Wife close to family													
Increase: wife close to family													
Husband close to family													
Increase: husband close to family													
Wife close to husband's family													
Increase: wife close to husband's family													
Husband close to wife's family													
Increase: husband close to wife's family													
Significance of difference in $R^2$	.19	.12	.25	.14	.11	.27	.20	.29	.40	.31	.29	.41	.41
N =	120	67	120	67	46	110	64	110	64	42	110	64	42
			$p < .05^a$	NS <sup>a</sup>	NS <sup>a</sup>	$p < .10^b$	NS <sup>b</sup>	$p < .05^b$	$p < .01^b$	$p < .05^b$	$p < .01^b$	$p < .01^b$	$p < .01^b$

**TABLE 5 (continued)**  
**Results of longitudinal regression analyses: predicting year 3 marital happiness: by gender, sex, race and level of stress**

	Predicting husbands' marital happiness											
	Step 1		Step 2				Step 3A				Step 3B	
	White	Black	White	Black	High	Black	White	Black	High	Black	White	Black
Happiness, year 1	.39****	.44****	.26†	.29†	.42****	.43****	.37****	.37****	.24	.24	.37****	.37****
Wife's intact family background												
Husband's intact family background												
Wife close to family												
Increase: wife close to family												
Husband close to family												
Increase: husband close to family												
Wife close to husband's family												
Increase: wife close to husband's family												
Husband close to wife's family												
Increase: husband close to wife's family												
Significance of difference in R <sup>2</sup>	.15	.20	.07	.08	.23	.29	.26	.24	.32	.24	.37	.30
N	118	67	46	46	67	64	110	110	42	110	64	42
					NS <sup>a</sup>	NS <sup>b</sup>	p < .05 <sup>b</sup>	p < .05 <sup>b</sup>	p < .01 <sup>b</sup>	p < .05 <sup>b</sup>	p < .05 <sup>b</sup>	p < .05 <sup>b</sup>

Note: Coefficients are standardized betas.  
 † p < .10; \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001; \*\*\*\* p < .0001.  
<sup>a</sup> Difference between Steps 1 and 2. <sup>b</sup> Difference between Steps 2 and 3.

happiness in year 3. In this analysis, only black couples in the high-stress category showed a significant effect. Corresponding coefficients for low-stress black and white men and women were not statistically significant.

In Step 3B, wives' and husbands' relationship with their in-laws had no significant effect on white couples' (low stress) marital happiness. However, in low-stress black couples increased closeness to their in-laws predicted marital happiness in the third year of their marriages. High-stress black couples show a different pattern: the wife's relationship with her husband's family and change in that relationship over 2 years predicts marital happiness.

For black husbands and wives in the low-stress category marital stress is predicted by increased closeness to their in-laws from year 1 to year 3 together. We know from first-order correlations that increased closeness to in-laws signals greater involvement with them, both in time spent together and help received. At the same time, increased closeness to in-laws reduced dependence on their own families along the same dimensions.

High-stress black couples are happier in their marriages when the wife is closer to her husband's family at the beginning of the marriage and when both the husband's and the wife's feelings of closeness to them increases. These results suggest that the husband's family plays a critical role in high-stress black couples' adjustment to marriage.

## **Discussion**

The major findings of this study give mixed support for the hypotheses that generated the analyses of the relationship between family ties and marital happiness over the early years of marriage. In support of our first hypothesis, we have a pattern of results, particularly in the black couples, that increasing closeness between a spouse and his or her in-laws relates to marital happiness. We later interpret these results in a way that implies that integration with in-laws may represent a move away from an embedded family system. In support of our second hypothesis, we have evidence that experiencing the stress of economic hardship and early family formation makes a difference in the way integration into family systems relates to marital happiness over the first 3 years of marriage. We have some clear evidence for our third hypothesis, that coming from a non-intact family background affects more negatively white spouses' marital adjustment than black spouses' adjustment. We have little evidence for our last hypothesis that family ties will affect men's and women's marital adjustment differently.

The groups that show the strongest relationship between closeness to in-laws and marital adjustment are black husbands and wives. Previous research has differentiated blacks from whites according to their structural context (e.g. economic power, intact family background and early family formation) and the strength of family ties. Blacks have had lower household incomes and were more likely to have come from a non-intact family and to have had a baby before marrying. Blacks have also shown stronger ties to family, which are generally described as reliance on the family for support and greater frequency of contact. In this study, black men and women also showed structural context differences and slightly stronger ties

to their families of origin. The importance of the relationship with in-laws varied by the level of stressful structural context but existed in some form across all levels. We inferred a connection between the importance of family ties to blacks on the one hand and the power of ties to in-laws to predict marital happiness on the other hand. The results suggested to us that integration into the in-law's family system may help disrupt the potentially negative consequences of being over-embedded in one's family of origin.

Family systems research has highlighted the connection between embeddedness in the family system and difficulty in adjusting to marriage. Embeddedness in the family system prevents newlyweds from establishing boundaries that separate for the couple the realm of action subject to family influence from that determined solely by the new couple. Consequently, the embedded family system wields too much influence over the new family. If the spouses develop a relationship with their in-laws, the intensity of the influence of their own family is diluted. The amount of time each spouse spends with his or her own family is reduced, as is the reliance on the family for support. In a way, the spouse/in-law relationship pulls the spouse out of an overly embedded family system. The strength of emotional ties to the family is not necessarily weakened according to these data, just the exclusivity of the family ties. This is a speculative interpretation worth following up in future research of family integration and the adjustment to marriage.

The differences between black couples in high- vs low-stress groups in this study are also provocative. Black husbands and wives in high-stress groups who were close to the husband's family were also happier in their marriages. However, the husband's relationship with his wife's family was not an issue in their marital adjustment. For black husbands and wives in low-stress groups, the importance of the wife's relationship to the husband's family was also a significant predictor of marital happiness; in this case, it was balanced by the importance of increased closeness between the husband and his wife's family.

We interpret these findings within the framework of research and data pointing to the negative effects of economic hardship and early family formation on the quality of support networks. If social support is less effective in alleviating a chronically stressful situation and the families of women who give birth premaritally tend to be more controlling and alienating, then the relationship between the wife's family and the new couple is likely to have few redeeming values. If a condition of high stress reflects problems in positive social support in the wife's family, then the husband's family serves multiple purposes for the emergent family. The couple's relationship with the husband's family may provide a welcome alternative to spending time in an intense or possibly overcontrolling atmosphere, where support may be lacking. It is also possible that the husband's family modifies the negative influence of the family of origin and provides a more hopeful model for a happy marriage.

These findings are significant because they lend further support to Mutran's (1985) data showing both SES and cultural value influences on the exchange of support in black and white families. Our data suggest that

there is a value of family ties among blacks that extends beyond their structural context.

Intact family background played no significant role in predicting black couples' marital adjustment but it significantly predicted white couples' marital happiness. We described previous research findings showing the tendency for divorce to be transmitted across generations and its connection with infrequent non-custodial parent-child contact and poor parent-adult child relations. As blacks have more frequent contact with their families and highly value their families, we reasoned that divorce or separation would affect blacks' adjustment to marriage less than it would whites' adjustment. The mechanism behind our hypothesis is undefined and certainly blacks are more likely to divorce than whites. Still, the negligible direct effect of intact family background on the marital happiness of blacks in this sample is hopeful.

In all, very few sex differences emerged in this study. In fact, there was considerable agreement between husbands and wives about the way family relationships influenced the new marriage. However, it was noteworthy that among high-stress black couples, what we interpreted as a problem between the wife and her family also became a problem for the husband and his marital happiness. Furthermore, her solution — closeness to her husband's family — became his solution, too.

This pattern echoes results described by Caspi & Elder (1988) in which instability in the wife's personality (influenced by instability in her family background) predicted marital dissatisfaction in the husband. Husbands' dissatisfaction did not, however, further increase the wife's instability. It had no effect on the wife at all. They concluded that the instability in the personality caused instability in the relationship but not the reverse. In other words, her problem is a problem for the relationship and must be solved for her. It is interesting, though, that if these data reflect women's problems being solved, they are solved by developing new family attachments.

While we have been emphasizing differences between the potential impact of black and white couples' relationships with their families of origin on the early years of their marriages, we should also emphasize that these two groups are similar in many ways. For example, we have little evidence that a wife's closeness to her family, *per se*, has much to do with marital happiness for either black couples or white couples. Other patterns likewise show little difference. Thus, in emphasizing differences between the two groups, we do not wish to convey that all patterns of family integration are distinctly different for black or white couples.

When considering the significance of these findings, it is important to consider the limitations of the data. Limitations center on these three themes: (1) the problem of attrition; (2) the problem of using single-item variables to measure complex feelings; and (3) the problem of using only the psychological dimension of the family support network to define what is essentially a psychological and behavioral structure (Surra & Milardo, 1991).

Attrition is a problem in all longitudinal studies. It is a particular problem in a study of black and white marriages, when black couples divorce at

a higher rate than whites and leave the study at a higher rate than whites. The effects of time in a particular stage on the duration of the marriage noted by Rodgers & White (1993) lead us to assume that the couples who remain in the study for 3 years have a greater likelihood of staying married, thus attenuating variation in responses, particularly among blacks respondents. In spite of the proportionally greater numbers of blacks dropping out of the study in the first 3 years (72% of all attrition is due to blacks leaving the study), black respondents drop out at a more regular rate than whites: 79 percent of blacks who drop out of the study have dropped out by year 3. Of the whites who drop out of the study, however, 97 percent have dropped out by year 3. So we have more fears about interpreting the lack of significant relationships among the whites due to attenuated variance than we do about interpreting the significant relationships among the blacks.

Second, there are risks in making generalizations about familial affect based on estimates of a single measure like 'closeness to family'. Combining husbands' and wives' perceptions of each other's closeness to their families and in-laws helped ensure that the perception of the meaning of 'closeness' was at least shared by both spouses. The stability of the measures across time was also quite high, which suggests some consistency in this shared view. However, future research should use more reliable, multiple-measure indices of familial affect.

Finally, it is important to understand that in our analyses we largely limited measurement of family ties to the psychological dimension of family networks. Surra & Milado (1991) distinguish between two facets of an individual's network — the psychological and the interactive — which only partly overlap. While statements about the closeness of family ties clearly illustrate the psychological aspect of the individual's network, statements about how often they visit their families (measured only in year 3) reflect more the interactive side. Although there are in our data (see Table 2) significant correlations between psychological closeness and contact with family, there are also instances of non-significant correlations between closeness and frequency of contact. This suggests that, had we focused on the interactive network relationships, patterns of our findings might have been different. Unfortunately, we did not have suitable measures of the interactive network in year 1 to carry out these analyses. These would be interesting avenues for future research.

We believe these data suggest both similarities and variations in the process of early family formation according to ethnicity, structural and gender role expectations. The variations do not seem to represent different levels of the same basic steps toward the next stage in family development. Rather, they seem to be different solutions to the quest for stability in a relationship that is constantly disrupted by developmental and structural change and enhanced by the special quality of ties to family as they exist in certain groups. In particular, integration with in-laws seems to play such an important role, especially among blacks, for ensuring marital well-being during the early years of marriage.

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