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Early Family Ties and Marital Stability Over 16 Years: The Context of Race and Gender

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Abstract

Spouses' emotional ties to family early in marriage are linked to marital outcomes, but little is known about how these ties affect marital stability and whether these effects vary by race and gender. The present study examines the links between emotional ties to family of origin and in-laws in the first year of marriage and marital stability over the first 16 years of marriage. Data were collected as part of a longitudinal study following Black American (n=199) and White American (n=174) married couples. Analyses revealed that perceptions of closeness to in-laws early in marriage were associated with odds of divorce over time, but the results varied by race and gender. Findings are discussed in terms of couples' ties to family early in marriage and the role that in-law bonds play for marital stability. We also offer insights for practitioners who provide premarital and marital education and counseling services to couples.

Keywords

Family Ties; Marriage; Divorce; Race; Black Americans

Marriages do not exist in a vacuum. A great deal of research has found that in early marriage, couples are intricately tied to their family members and are influenced by important connections, social interactions, and socialization processes within those family networks (Sullivan & Davila, 2010). The Convoy Model of Social Relations (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) argues that couples are embedded within family networks that can either facilitate or hamper the marital relationship over time. Yet, research examining whether these early family ties are beneficial or detrimental to the marital relationship have shown

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inconsistent findings (Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003). We also know little about the links between close family ties in the first few years of marriage and marital stability at later points in time and whether these effects vary by race and gender (Taylor, Jackson, & Chatters, 1997).

The present study focused on perceived family ties, among newlywed White and Black American couples in the first year of marriage and assessed the implications of those ties for divorce over the first 16 years of marriage. Specifically, the study had two goals. First, we assessed whether perceived emotional closeness to family of origin and in-laws, in the first year of marriage, predicted marital stability over sixteen years. In addition, we explored whether self-reported spousal conflict about both sets of family plays a role in marital stability over time. These findings provide information on the ways perceived closeness and conflict about own family and in-laws are detrimental, beneficial or a combination of both for marriages over time. Second, we examined whether reports of closeness and conflict to both sets of family, and the effects of these family ties on marital stability, vary by race and gender. Little research has examined the effects of family ties on marital outcomes using large and diverse samples, and given the differential trends by race in marital outcomes and the significance of family ties to those outcomes, it is unknown whether the association between family ties and the odds of divorce varies by race and gender.

Family Ties in Early Marriage

According to the Convoy Model of Social Relations (Antonucci, 2001; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) couples are embedded within family networks that have both structural (e.g., size, how close individuals live to one another, frequency of contact) and personal qualities (e.g., type of relationships, emotional closeness), which influence the frequency, quality, and quantity of support to network members. Although the structural qualities of these family ties are useful information, many argue that the personal qualities of these family ties, such as emotional closeness between family members, provides a more complete picture of the complexity of interactions, their meaning, and their effects for the stability of a marriage (Brown, Orbuch, & Maharaj, 2010). Relatedly, Family Systems Theory (Minuchin, 1974) also maintains that couples are embedded within a “family system,” which consists of interdependent emotional ties between spouses and their families that influence the couple’s functioning over time.

These family ties can be a valuable resource and provide various types of social capital to individuals, families, and married couples, especially in the early years of marriage (Antonucci, 2001; Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, & Boardman, 2001). For example, family members can lend and borrow to help each other meet financial obligations. However, there is a lack of consensus in the literature about the ways in which close family ties are beneficial, detrimental, or a combination of both for couples’ marital stability. Some research indicates that close positive family ties are essential to the development of a stable marital relationship. Sprecher, Felmlee, Schmeekle, and Shu (2006) argue that families of origin serve as models that couples can use to shape their own marriages over time. These ties also provide members with a sense of belonging and enable members to share and exchange practical and economic resources (Krause et al., 2001; Taylor & Chatters, 1988).

Furthermore, Helms et al. (2003) found that family bonds positively affect the marital relationship by buffering the negative effects of conflict on marital outcomes. Close family ties, for example, allow spouses to confide in others about their marital problems. In turn, family might encourage reconciliation or resolutions to effectively deal with the marital problems. While reconciliation is not always the best solution, this advice can be beneficial to both individual and marital well-being. Taken together, some research supports the positive effect that early family ties can have on couples' marital stability.

Other studies indicate that close family ties can potentially provoke a great deal of stress and conflict within couples (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). From a Eurocentric viewpoint, Family Systems Theory maintains that to establish unity and connectedness to each other, newlyweds need to establish clear boundaries with their family of origin (Minuchin, 1974). In over-embedded family networks, family ties can negatively influence the couple by conveying certain ideas about how married couples should interact or by feeling entitled to offer unsolicited and unwanted advice (Sprecher et al., 2006). While unintentional, this assistance may be perceived as interference, resulting in feelings of distress or potential conflict between spouses, which may ultimately lead to marital instability.

Less is known about how family ties with in-laws affect marriages given the limited availability of longitudinal studies following couples over long periods of time. In-law relations are involuntary ties, which are created through marriage, and some spouses never feel truly comfortable or close to their in-laws (Globerman, 1996). Research indicates that these ties are particularly stressful for spouses, especially for wives (Bryant et al., 2001; Turner, Young, & Black, 2006). Bryant et al. (2001), followed couples for a 4-year time span and found that the quality of the in-law relationship positively predicted spouses' stability, satisfaction, and commitment to the marriage at a later time period. Further, findings by Timmer and Veroff (2000) indicated that when husbands and wives felt close to their in-laws early in marriage (and perceived these bonds as having low conflict), couples reported higher marital well-being in later years. In addition, they found that a spouse's reports of closeness toward in-laws were more strongly positively linked with marital well-being than feelings of closeness to his/her own family. In general, these findings suggest that in early marriage, a spouse's feelings of closeness toward in-laws are critical to marital outcomes over time.

Overall, there are contradictory results regarding the effects of early family ties on marital outcomes and limited information on whether close family ties in the first year of marriage affect marital stability at later points in time. The present study sought to examine the links between spouses' perceived emotional ties to family of origin and in-laws in the first year of marriage and marital stability over the first 16 years of marriage.

Family Ties and Marital Stability Given the Context of Race and Gender

Longitudinal studies of marriage often lack racial and ethnic diversity, and rarely follow the same couples beyond the early years of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Yet, the

effects of early family ties on marital stability over the course of a marriage may vary by both race and gender.

The context of race

Research findings indicate that Black Americans report closer and more involved family ties than White Americans and that this family involvement may be particularly important for early marriage among Black American couples (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Janevic, 2001; Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 1993; Timmer, Veroff, & Hatchett, 1996). Nonetheless, these studies also acknowledge that close family ties can create stress and tension for Black American marriages (Ajrouch et. al., 2001; Sarkisian & Gertsel, 2004). For example, Birditt and Antonucci (2007) discovered that married Black Americans reported having significantly lower quality family ties than married White Americans. The researchers argued that this difference is reflective of Black American couples having family ties with fewer resources to provide help to the married couple.

Similarly, Neighbors (1997) analyzed data from the National Survey of Black Americans to examine whether family members who provide support could also be sources of stress. He found that although 90% of the Black American respondents reported that they felt very or fairly close to their family members, these family ties also contained great conflict and stress. In particular, Black married individuals provided more support to their family members than received, and a majority of the married spouses stated that the family difficulties were a result of the strain related to providing resources and support to two sets of family networks. Neighbors maintained that the family stress reported by Black American married spouses is the result of giving more economic and psychological support to other family members, compared to what they are receiving, without any expectation of balanced support or reciprocity.

Another study by Marks et al. (2008) focused on 30 happy enduring Black American married couples to examine the external and internal challenges faced by these couples. They conducted extensive qualitative interviews with spouses and found that one of the biggest challenges faced by these couples was the strain of providing various types of support to extended family and fictive kin. The authors argued that, “so prevalent were these calls for help that literally and figuratively came to the doors of the married couples that we refer to these calls as ‘knocks of need’” (Marks et al., 2008, p. 176). It is important to note that although providing unreciprocated family support was stressful for these married Black couples, it did not necessarily lead to spousal conflict surrounding these family ties.

Although these family ties may be stressful, a major normative theme in the narratives of Black American spouses in the early years of marriage was the integration and consideration of both sets of family in the couple’s life (Chadiha, Veroff, & Leber, 1998). Consequently, given the research discussed above, we expected Black American married couples would report greater emotional closeness to own family and in-laws in early marriage, and less spousal conflict regarding both sets of families than White American couples. In addition, we anticipated that the association between early family ties and marital stability over time would vary between White and Black American couples. Given the scarcity of longitudinal data, we were unable to make specific predictions about the effects of early closeness and

conflict over the first sixteen years of marriage. However, given the strong norms for close family ties in the Black community, we expected family ties (to both sets of family) would more significantly positively be associated with the marital stability of Black American couples, compared to White American couples.

The context of gender

The effects of family ties on marital stability also may vary by gender (Antonucci, 2001; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). Women tend to be responsible for maintaining the kinship relations in a marriage (Antonucci, 1990), and may be expected to create bonds and maintain the ties of both sides of the family (Bryant et al., 2001; Turner et al., 2006). These family relationships may be central to women's lives (Fingerman, 2003), but the stress of maintaining these ties might become burdensome and challenging to wives over the course of a marriage. Birditt and Antonucci (2007) found that while women reported more emotionally close relationships with friends and families than men, they also reported more negativity in their personal relationships. Men reported more generally positive personal relationships than women. Similarly, Burger and Milardo (1995) found that the impact of strong family connections on marital happiness was generally positive for husbands and negative for wives.

Due to these gender differences in perceptions and effects of family ties on marital and individual well-being, we expected that reports of family ties (both own family and in-laws) from the wives' perspective would be predictive of marital stability, but not husbands' reports. Specifically, we anticipated that wives who reported close ties to both sets of families (and less conflict surrounding their families) would be more likely to stay married over time. Nonetheless, given the stressful nature of in-law bonds for married women, we also posited that these ties would be especially significant for marital stability over the first sixteen years of marriage (i.e., wives who perceived close ties to their in-laws (and less spousal conflict) in early marriage would be more likely to stay married over time. Lastly, because of the gender and race differences discussed above, we also expected that close family ties (both sets of family) early in marriage would be more significantly predictive of marital stability as reported by Black American wives, compared to White American wives.

Other Sociodemographic and Life Course Factors

We also considered several sociodemographic variables that may influence the effects of close family ties on divorce, as covariates. These variables were selected to account for pre-existing conditions at the time of marriage (Year 1) and for their importance in the literature on marriage and divorce. Sociodemographics including younger age, the presence of premarital child(ren), cohabitation, wife's employment, lower education, lower income, and parental divorce have predicted higher divorce rates, although the effects varied in some studies (Amato, 1996; Broman, 2005; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002).

Present Study

Findings regarding the effects of family ties on marital stability have been inconsistent, and few studies have examined the effects of early family ties with both family of origin and in-

laws on marital stability over time. The present study contributes to the literature by investigating Year 1 self-reported emotional closeness and spousal conflict regarding both sets of family, among a diverse sample of Black American and White American newlywed husbands and wives over 16 years of marriage. Further, because most studies do not frequently control for important sociodemographic factors that differentiate couples, we also considered sociodemographic variables that might influence divorce and family ties in our study (Amato, 1996; Broman, 2005; Orbuch et al., 2002). Given previous literature on racial and gender differences in the meanings and norms of family ties, we hypothesized that reports of family ties (both family of origin and in-laws) would be predictive of marital stability over time, as reported by wives but not husbands. In addition, because Black Americans were expected to feel greater closeness to family and in-laws (and less spousal conflict to both sides) in early marriage, we anticipated this link to be stronger for Black American wives, compared to White American wives.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

Data were collected as part of a longitudinal panel study following 373 couples (199 Black American and 174 White American) who applied for marriage licenses in Wayne County, Michigan during April-June 1986. Eligible couples were same-race couples applying for their first marriage where the wife was less than 35 years old. All eligible Black American couples and a random sample of the eligible White American couples were contacted for participation. Both members of the couple had to agree to participate (65% of Black American and 66% of White American couples agreed to participate). When we compared our sample to first married couples by race in the General Social Survey Data (1980–1994), there were no differences on demographic qualities such as income, education, parental status, likelihood of cohabitation, and employment status (see Orbuch et al., 2002, for more information).

Respondents were asked an extensive battery of questions about themselves, their spouses, and their marriages. Respondents participated in face-to-face individual interviews with a race-matched interviewer, in the first (1986), third (1988), seventh (1993), and sixteenth (2002) years of their marriages. Very few couples refused to participate once they began the project in Year 1.

The marital stability of each couple was computed from the information we obtained for each respondent (1=married; 0=divorced) in each year. To get the most precise estimates of which respondents divorced during Years 1–16, we investigated the marital status of all 373 original couples through extensive tracking efforts and telephone interviews in Years 14 and 16 of the project. In Year 16, we were able to get marital status information on all but four couples (99% of the original sample). Table 1 presents percentages of couples who exited the study because of divorce or attrition. For the longitudinal analyses, marital stability was used as the time-to-event (censored) dependent variable. This time-varying outcome allowed us to examine the duration of marriage (i.e., time-to-divorce).

In Year 1 of the study, the husbands' and wives' mean age was 24 years. The average educational level included one year of postsecondary schooling. About 55% of the Black American couples (55% wives; 50% husbands) and 23% of the White American couples (22% wives; 18% husbands) entered marriage with at least one child. About 65% of the Black American couples and 41% of the White American couples had cohabited before marriage. Over 41% of the White American wives and 59% of the Black American wives were employed in Year 1. In terms of their family of origin, about 30% of the wives (24% White American; 36% Black American) and 21% of the husbands (12% White American; 29% Black American) had parents who were divorced before age 16. Overall, in Year 1, 38% of the White American couples and 22% of the Black American couples reported annual couple incomes of more than \$40,000 in 1986. Table 2 presents significant differences by race among husbands and wives. The results suggest that the Black American husbands and wives, compared to White American husbands and wives, have more of the sociodemographic factors (e.g., divorced parents, lower income, employed wives, child before marriage, less education for husbands) that are significantly predictive of the risk of divorce over time (Orbuch, House, Mero, & Webster, 1996).

Measures

Family ties: Closeness variables—We measured several qualities of family ties as reported by both husbands and wives in Year 1 of the study. First, respondents were asked to assess their own feelings about closeness toward family of origin and in-laws. *Respondent feels close with own family* asked respondents to state how close they feel to their own family (1=Not at all close, 4=Very close). *Respondent feels close to in-laws* asked respondents to state how close they felt to their spouse's family (1=Not at all close, 4=Very close).

Next, given the use of single-item measures for our family closeness concepts, we decided to assess how well the spouses agreed about their evaluations of emotional closeness. In the interview, respondents also were asked to report on their spouse's feelings of closeness toward own family and in-laws. Respondents were asked to state how close they perceived their spouse felt toward own family (*spouse feels close to in-laws*) and his/her family (*spouse feels close to his/her own family*). Although these spouse variables were not included in the survival analyses, it is important to note that there was moderately high agreement between husbands' and wives' reports about each other with self-reports of closeness to both sets of family. The average intraclass (i.e., dyad) correlation across family tie measures was .56 with a 95% confidence interval of .49 and .62.

We also tested whether the measures of closeness with own family and with in-laws were unique concepts from one another. Our findings indicated that across all family closeness variables, the correlations were approximately .47 or less, which suggests that although there is some shared variance, the concepts were unique and should not be combined into one variable.

Family ties: Conflict variables—We also assessed respondents' reported conflict with their spouse as a result of family using two measures: (1) Have you and your spouse ever

had any tension or differences about your in-laws, and (2) Have you and your spouse ever had any tension or differences about your family. Both variables, *Conflict regarding in-laws* and *Conflict regarding own family*, were dummy variables (0 = No or 1 = Yes).

Sociodemographic variables—Several variables were selected to account for pre-existing conditions at the time of marriage (Year 1) and for their importance in the literature on marriage and divorce. For analyses predicting divorce, these Year 1 social and economic conditions are controls because of their importance in the literature examining marriage and divorce (Orbuch et al., 2002). *Age* was operationalized as respondents' reported age during the Year 1 interview. *Race* assessed whether the respondent was White American (0) or Black American (1). For *Household income*, interviewers asked respondents to select from income categories for the entire household before taxes. Respondent's income was then coded as the midpoint of the category selected. Responses were divided by 10,000 so that unstandardized survival parameter estimates would not round to zero. *Education* was the highest grade of school or year of college that they had completed by Year 1, which was coded into the total number of years of schooling completed.

Cohabitation was defined as the number of months that each respondent reported living with his/her spouse before marriage. *Working wife* indicated whether the wife reported any employment in Year 1 (0=Unemployed, 1=Employed), and *Parents' marital status* identified those respondents who had divorced parents prior to their sixteenth birthday (0=Married household, 1=Parents divorced before respondent was 16 years old).

We also examined three markers of having children prior to marriage: (1) Any children or pregnant prior to marriage (yes/no), (2) Number of children birthed prior to marriage, and (3) Number of children from someone other than spouse. We did not use number of children from someone other than spouse as an indicator as there were too few cases (25 wives, 20 husbands) for multivariate analyses. Given that the dichotomous and open-ended indicators of children prior to marriage provided similar coefficients in subsequent analyses, we used the dichotomous indicator in the survival analyses to facilitate interpretation. Furthermore, given the high inter-correlation between husbands and wives likelihood of both entering their marriage with or without children ($r = .83$), and the higher burden of being a woman entering a marriage with a child, we operationalized *Child before marriage* to reflect whether the wife had a child or was pregnant before marriage (0=No child, 1=Child or pregnant before marriage). This variable has construct validity (Orbuch et al., 2002) and has been found to be associated with marital outcomes in previous analyses with this dataset.

Analytic Strategy

Given the variation in the longevity of marriages in our sample, we used survival analyses to examine the timing of divorce across the sixteen years included in our study. In particular, Cox regression (proportional hazards) analysis allowed us to examine the exploratory factors that predict the odds or timing of divorce. Cox regression makes no assumptions about the distribution of time to divorce. This methodology also allowed us to use data for all couples in our sample, until they dropped out due to divorce. Using the hierarchical Cox regression, we tested the effects of family ties in Year 1 on the odds of divorce across Years 1 through

16. The hierarchical approach allowed us to explore how the magnitude and significance of each family tie measure changed as other measures were entered into the model in a step-wise fashion. In order to allow for our discrete array of survival times (measured in years, rather than in months or days), we used the “discrete” method of ties handling (Allison, 1995). We excluded three wives and four husbands from subsequent analyses due to missing data on one or more explanatory variables.

Rather than estimating a couple’s association between family ties and odds of divorce (i.e., dyadic analyses), we chose to examine these associations separately for husbands and wives given our interest in understanding gender’s role in these complex relationships. This analytic decision was further supported by the presence of variables specific to the husband or wife. In preparation for the multivariate analyses, we then explored the correlations across all study variables (sociodemographic and family ties) and found multicollinearity ($r > .50$) would not be a concern for subsequent analyses.

We entered all Year 1 sociodemographic variables to serve as controls (Model 1a). Only significant controls were kept in the first model. Two notable exceptions were made. The measures of *Household income* and *Parents’ marital status* were kept in the base model for husbands and wives, due to their theoretical significance as a major predictor in marital stability outcomes. Given our interest in understanding the context of race, we then computed a second model including all possible race by sociodemographic variable interactions (Model 1b). Significant sociodemographic variables by race interactions for wives’ and husbands’ predictors were included as controls in all subsequent Cox regression models.

In order to examine whether *early* family ties (both own and in-law) had a long-lasting influence on marital stability, we then entered Year 1 family tie measures into the model (Model 2). Prior to removing non-significant family ties measures, however, we also tested for potential interaction effects between family variables and race. Non-significant interactions were then removed from the final model (Model 3). We also examined the interactions between all family tie variables (e.g., closeness to own family x closeness to in-laws; conflict surrounding own family x conflict surrounding in-laws). None of these interactions were statistically significant on the odds of divorce. Thus, we concluded that there is no evidence to suggest that closeness or conflict surrounding both sets of family is more or less predictive of marital stability over time.

We also carried out sensitivity analyses to ensure that our results remained unchanged when Efron ties were used (Singer & Willett, 2003). In addition, we evaluated whether the effects of the family ties measures on marital stability changed over time by creating interaction terms between study variables and the time variable. A significant time interaction term would indicate that the magnitude of the association between a family tie predictor and marital stability changed according to how long a couple was married (Singer & Willett, 2003). No time interactions were significant and were not included in the final models (i.e., the magnitude of the associations between family ties measures and the odds of divorce were consistent over time). Lastly, we tested whether the effects of family ties on the odds of divorce were non-linear. We analyzed whether the squared term of each family tie predictor

was associated with the odds of divorce in the Cox Regressions. The results indicated that none of the curvilinear terms were statistically significant, indicating a linear relationship between all the family ties variables and the odds of divorce over time.

Results

We first examined whether there were differences early in marriage in each spouse's perceptions of closeness with own family and with in-laws, and reported spousal conflict about both sets of family between Black American and White American couples. We tested differences in study variables by gender and race using t or χ^2 tests (see Table 2). The findings indicated that Black American husbands reported significantly less closeness to their in-laws and less conflict regarding both sides of the family than White American husbands. Similarly, compared to White American wives, Black American wives reported significantly less closeness and less conflict regarding their in-laws. We found no significant differences by race on husbands' or wives' closeness to their own family.

Marital Stability and Family Ties as Reported by Husbands

Next, we assessed the effects of these early family ties, as reported by husbands and wives separately, on the odds of divorce over the first sixteen years of marriage. The results in Table 3 (see Model 1a) indicated that in terms of the sociodemographic factors in Year 1, only race and education were independently associated with the odds of divorce. Black American husbands were 1.88 times more likely to divorce over time than their White American counterparts (OR = 1.88, $p < .01$). Husbands' education was negatively associated with the odds of divorce (OR = 0.85, $p < .01$), with the odds of divorce decreasing by 15% with every additional year of education for husbands.

The results in Table 3 (see Model 1b) also indicated two significant race interactions on the odds of divorce. First, the effect of husbands' education on the odds of divorce was conditioned by race (OR = 1.34, $p < .01$). When plotted, every additional year of husbands' education was more protective against the odds of divorce for White American couples than for Black American couples. Second, the effect of income, as reported by husbands, on the odds of divorce also was conditioned by race (OR = .77, $p < .05$). Increases in income for White American husbands were associated with increased odds of divorce over time. For Black American husbands, however, increases in income resulted in decreased odds of divorce over time.

The results in Model 2 indicated that when the family ties variables were entered into the equation, a husband's perception of closeness to his in-laws early in marriage was significantly predictive of the odds of divorce (OR = .79, $p < .05$), after adjusting for the effects of education and income, and their interactions with race. The odds of divorce over time decreased by 20% the closer a husband felt to his in-laws early in the marriage. We found no other statistically significant associations between the husbands' family closeness or conflict variables and the odds of divorce over time.

Marital Stability and Family Ties as Reported by Wives

In Table 4, we present the results for the effects of family ties, as reported by wives, on the odds of divorce over time. First, wives' race and education were associated with the odds of divorce across Years 1–16 (see Model 1a). Black American wives were 2.20 times more likely to divorce than their White American counterparts ($OR = 2.20, p < .01$). As with husbands, wives' education was significantly associated with the odds of divorce ($OR = .78, p < .01$), with the likelihood of divorce decreasing by 28% with every additional year of education.

In Model 2, the results indicated that a wife's perception of closeness to her in-laws early in marriage was significantly associated with the odds of divorce over time ($OR = .82, p < .05$). In Model 2, the results indicated that parents' marital status was significantly associated with the odds of divorce ($OR = 1.18, p < .05$), once closeness to in-laws was included in the equation. Wives, whose parents divorced before they were 16 years old, were 1.18 times more likely to divorce than wives whose parents did not divorce. We found no other statistically significant associations between the wives' family closeness or conflict variables and the odds of divorce over time.

In Model 3, we also found a significant interaction between a wife's perception of closeness to her in-laws early in marriage and race on the odds of divorce over time ($OR = .64, p < .05$). As shown in Figure 1, the results in Model 3 indicated that White American couples were at greater odds of divorce the closer wives felt to their in-laws early in marriage. Consequently, this race-conditioned effect suggested that the odds of divorce increased the closer White American wives felt to their in-laws early in the marriage. This effect was opposite for Black American couples, with the odds of divorce decreasing the closer wives felt to their in-laws.

Discussion

The present study examined links between family ties (i.e., closeness and spousal conflict about both sets of families) early in marriage and marital stability over time, among a sample of Black American and White American couples. Our findings suggest that consistent with previous frameworks (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Minuchin, 1974), spouses' emotional ties to family, specifically in-laws, are linked to marital outcomes. However, the findings vary by race and gender; the meaning of early family ties depended on whether the respondent was Black American or White American and a wife or husband. Specifically, the present findings extend the existing research on early family ties (Ajrouch et al., 2001; Taylor et al., 1993) by suggesting that early family ties are detrimental for marital stability only among White American wives who have close emotional ties to their in-laws. In contrast, close emotional ties with in-laws as reported by White American husbands and Black American husbands and wives increase marital stability.

First, consistent with previous research (Ajrouch et al., 2001; Neighbors, 1996, 1997), we found that there were significant differences in self-reports of family ties early in marriage among Black American and White American couples. Surprisingly however, we found differences in emotional closeness as reported by husbands and wives, but only for family

ties with in-laws. Further, these race differences in family ties contradicted our initial hypothesis. Black American husbands and wives perceived significantly less closeness to their in-laws than White American couples. Black American spouses also were significantly less likely to report spousal conflict over in-laws and Black American husbands perceived less spousal conflict over own family than White American husbands. We maintain that consistent with previous arguments (Marks et al., 2008; Chadiha et al., 1998), family ties with in-laws may become a challenge faced by Black American couples early in marriage, even after controlling for education and household income. It is plausible that the strain of supporting both sides of the family early in a marriage may affect the emotional closeness that Black American spouses report toward the family that they married into. Although these family ties may be stressful, it is important to note that given the cultural traditions toward supporting and assisting family, they do not lead to greater conflict and tension among Black American spouses, particularly when compared to White American spousal conflict surrounding in-laws. Alternatively, it is also possible that our specific measures of conflict did not adequately assess the stress and tension of family ties among Black Americans, as found in previous studies (Ajrouch et al., 2001; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). Nonetheless, as we discuss below, these early differences in family ties had implications for couples' marital stability.

Our longitudinal analyses revealed the complexity of family ties for marital stability. The findings indicated that the effects of family ties, specifically emotional ties with in-laws early in marriage, have long lasting effects on couples' marital stability over time. However, as discussed below, race and gender contextualize the association between ties to in-laws early in the marriage and marital stability over the first 16 years of marriage.

The context of race and gender

In our study, the links between feelings of closeness to family and marital stability over time depended on both race and gender. For husbands, consistent with one set of the literature (Sprecher et al., 2006; Helms et al., 2003), the results indicated that feelings of closeness to family, specifically in-laws, reduced the odds of divorce over time, regardless of race. We speculate that these close emotional ties are important to marital stability, because they connect a husband to his wife's family. In turn, husbands' closeness to their in-laws may also strengthen the bond to their wives, as wives may place great value on husbands getting along with their family. This interpretation is consistent with research indicating that relationships and family ties are more central to the lives of women than men (Antonucci, 1990; Fingerma, 2003).

For wives, the links between feelings of closeness to in-laws and marital stability depended on the context of race. When White American wives reported feelings of closeness to in-laws, couples were significantly more likely to divorce over the first 16 years of marriage. We argue that for White wives, interconnected ties to in-laws early in marriage may interfere with and prevent the formation of a strong bond between White American spouses. This interference argument is consistent with Family Systems Theory (Minuchin, 1974), which maintains that it is important for newlyweds to establish clear emotional boundaries with their families of origin. Our findings indicate that early in marriage at least for the White

wives in our study, close emotional ties with in-laws, rather than family of origin, may be interpreted as interference and have long term negative effects on the marriage.

In contrast, similar to previous findings (Bryant et al., 2001; Timmer & Veroff, 2000), close ties to in-laws as reported by Black American wives were beneficial to marital stability over time. When Black American wives reported feeling close to their in-laws, they were significantly less likely to divorce over the first 16 years of marriage. Similar to the argument by Taylor and Chatters (1988) we propose that close emotional in-law ties may provide affirmation and other psychological and practical benefits (e.g., child care and other necessary household help) to Black American wives buffer the consequences of economic and other structural stressors that may affect the marriage for Black American couples.

Our study has several limitations. First, closeness to families and conflict between spouses regarding families may vary over time and lead to different marital stability outcomes. Our interest was primarily in the role of family ties early in the marriage, and we did not explore whether changes in family ties over time were associated with marital stability across the first 16 years of marriage. Future research should explore whether different family interdependence trajectories are associated with marital stability over time. Second, we did not perform dyad-level analyses. Our current study helps us understand how spouses' interactions with their families early in marriage independently (separately by husbands and wives) are predictive of marital stability over time. It is important to also examine the couples' joint connections with family as these ties may be linked to marital stability over time. We also acknowledge that our use of single-item measures for closeness to and conflict surrounding both sets of families was not ideal. Although we provided additional analyses regarding agreement between spouses on the family closeness variables, in the future, we hope to establish better multi-item indicators of spouses' emotional ties to families. Future research should expand on this study's findings by exploring the effects of family ties on marital stability within couples.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

The current study's findings offer important insights for practitioners who provide education and counseling services to premarital and married couples. In particular, our findings highlight the need to explore in-law ties prior to and after couples make the transition to marriage. Premarital counselors and educators can draw on these findings when discussing challenges that couples may face in the early years of marriage as they (re)negotiate their family-of-origin relationships. By having premarital couples discuss their current in-law ties and expectations for the future, practitioners can assist couples in negotiating the often complex role that in-laws play in the lives of married couples.

Findings from this study also could benefit marriage therapists who work with newly married couples. In previous studies, married women and men report that strained relationships with in-laws would not be a reason to seek marital therapy (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003; Bringle & Byers, 1997). Although in-law bonds may not compel couples to seek marital counseling, our results demonstrate that the status and quality of these bonds nevertheless should be assessed in therapeutic encounters regardless of the couple's

presenting concern. There is value in assessing each partner's emotional closeness to their in-laws in addition to the meaning each spouse attaches to such family ties, as the latter may determine whether in-law ties may ultimately threaten the stability of the marital bond. Because discussions about one's spouse's parents can be difficult and emotionally-charged, marriage therapists may be uniquely positioned to facilitate spouses' exploration of this issue.

At the same time, our study suggests that "one-size-fits-all" approaches to exploring the role that in-laws play in early marriage are likely to be inadequate. Given our results, it is clear that the contexts of race and gender are important to consider when working with premarital and married couples. Specifically, findings from our study complicate our existing knowledge of family dynamics between Black American couples and their in-laws, and provide a different view of how Black American couples may negotiate their in-law relationships. The lower levels of perceived emotional closeness reported by Black American couples suggest that Black American couples may, in fact, signal the utility of acknowledging diverse manifestations of relationship "boundaries" between family members. We speculate that Black American couples may negotiate emotional connectedness in ways that protect them against the potential deleterious effects related to the stress induced by being more likely than White American couples to be solicited for instrumental (i.e., financial) support (Marks et al., 2008). Thus, it is paramount that therapists demonstrate cultural competence by exploring the meanings that couples attach to the notion of boundaries or emotional connectedness. Further, it is important to examine how couples may negotiate such connections in ways that could be beneficial, detrimental, or a combination of both to the couple's marital stability over time.

In recent years, discussion about the state of marriage has gained national prominence (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Our study further contributes to the literature on marriage by underscoring the significance of spouses' closeness to in-laws early in marriage for predicting marital stability over time. We found that there was a tendency for the odds of divorce to decrease when husbands and Black wives felt close to their in-laws, but the opposite was true when White wives reported closeness to their in-laws. Married couples may experience challenges and problems in blending their lives and families together, especially early in marriage, but it is the family ties one marries into that have strong implications for the couple over the course of the marriage. Ultimately, we hope this study will lead to additional research on the complex nature of family ties for marital outcomes over time, given the contexts of race and gender. Understanding the contextual factors that influence marital stability has the potential to inform research, practice, and programming.

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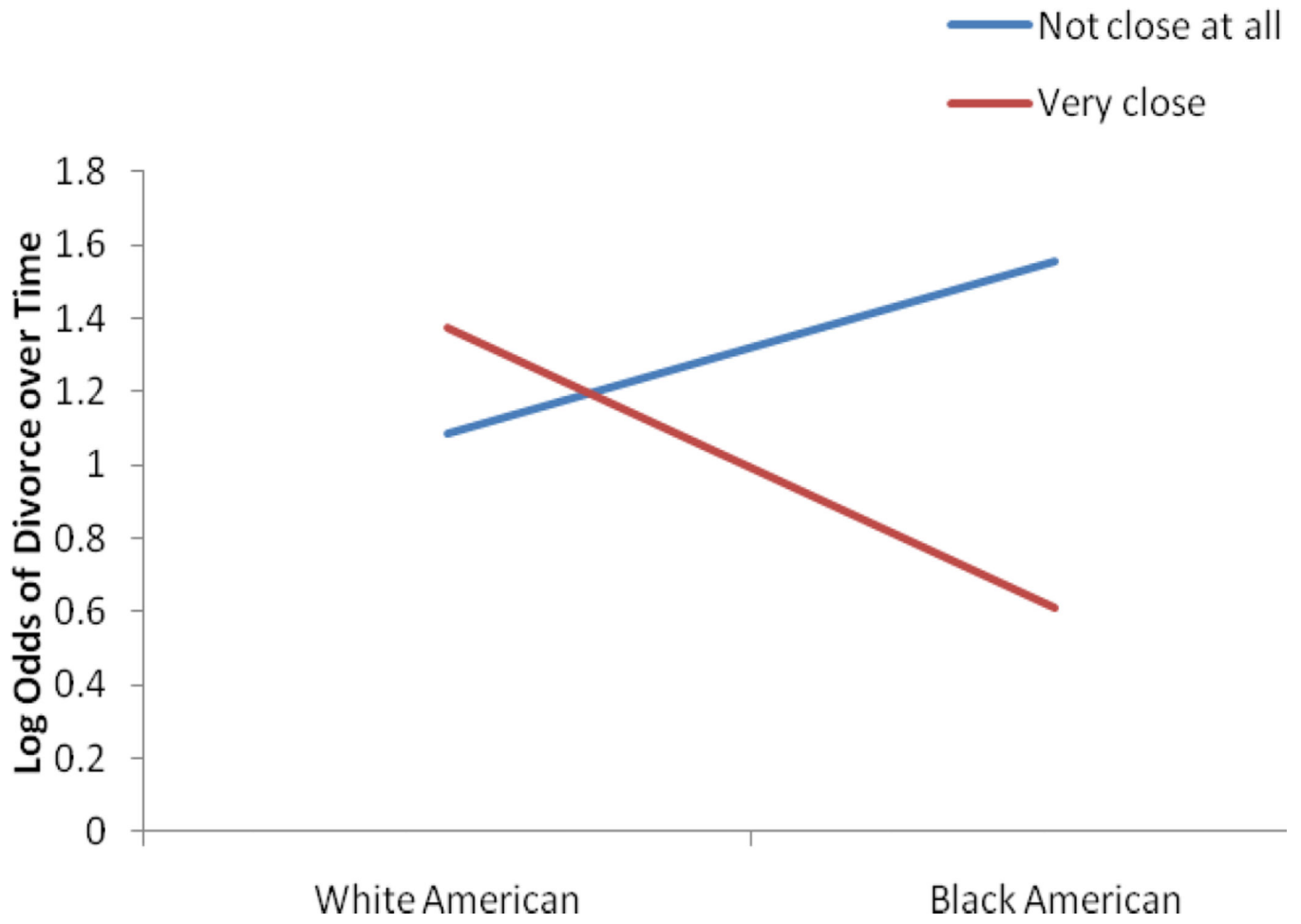


Figure 1. Interaction Effect of Race by Wives' Perceived Closeness to In-Laws on the Odds of Divorce Over Time.

Table 1

Marital Status by Race across Years 1 through 16

Marital Status	Year 1	Year 3	Year 7	Year 14	Year 16
Married	373 (100%)	304 (81.5%)	242 (64.9%)	195 (52.3%)	183 (49.1%)
White	174 (100%)	155 (89.1%)	135 (77.6%)	115 (66.1%)	108 (62.1%)
Black	199 (100%)	149 (74.9%)	107 (53.8%)	80 (40.2%)	75 (37.7%)
Divorced/Separated		52 (13.9%)	108 (29.0%)	151 (40.5%)	172 (46.1%)
White		16 (9.2%)	35 (20.1%)	52 (29.9%)	63 (36.2%)
Black		36 (18.1%)	73 (36.7%)	99 (49.7%)	109 (54.8%)
Ineligible				6 (1.6%)	14 (3.8%)
White				3 (1.7%)	3 (1.7%)
Black				3 (1.5%)	11 (5.5%)
Unknown		17 (4.6%)	23 (6.2%)	21 (5.6%)	4 (1.1%)
White		3 (1.7%)	4 (2.3%)	4 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Black		14 (7.0%)	19 (9.5%)	17 (8.5%)	4 (2.0%)

Note. Ineligible respondents are deceased/widowed or severely ill. There were 4 couples who were separated or divorced in Year 14, but remarried their Year 1 spouse by Year 16.

Table 2

Race Differences on Study Variables for Husbands and Wives at Year 1

Year 1 Variable	Overall M (SD)	White Americans M (SD)	Black Americans M (SD)	df	t/ χ^2
HUSBANDS					
Education	13.11(1.92)	13.33(1.97)	12.92(1.86)	371	2.09**
Income	3.17(1.79)	3.71(1.78)	2.70(1.68)	366	5.60***
Cohabitation	11.57(20.75)	6.61(13.58)	15.88(24.63)	316.12	-4.57***
Working Wife	53%	41%	59%	1	3.68*
Child before Marriage	35%	18%	50%	1	38.23***
Parents' Marital Status	21%	12%	29%	1	15.42***
Feels Close to Own Family	3.72(.55)	3.69(.57)	3.75(.53)	369	-1.05
Feels Close to In-Laws	3.29(.73)	3.32(.71)	3.20(.70)	369	1.66*
Conflict Regarding In-Laws	36%	45%	28%	1	3.15*
Conflict Regarding Own Family	40%	39%	31%	1	5.67***
WIVES					
Education	13.12(1.89)	13.04(1.79)	13.20(1.79)	370	-.83
Income	3.02(1.74)	3.48(1.76)	2.61(1.62)	366	4.90***
Cohabitation	11.06(20.49)	6.93(14.63)	14.67(23.95)	333.58	-3.82***
Working Wife	53%	41%	59%	1	3.68*
Child Before Marriage	40%	22%	55%	1	41.79***
Parents' Marital Status	30%	24%	36%	1	7.00***
Feels Close to Own family	3.79(.48)	3.79(.48)	3.78(.48)	371	.18
Feels Close to In-Laws	3.14(.84)	3.23(.84)	3.06(.84)	370	1.84*
Conflict Regarding Own Family	39%	45%	38%	1	.03
Conflict Regarding In-Laws	39%	39%	33%	1	5.85***

† *p* .10.

* *p* .05.

*** *p* .01.

Table 3
 Hierarchical Regression for Husbands on Odds of Divorce across Years 1 through 16

Covariate	Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 2	
	β (SE)	OR	β (SE)	OR	β (SE)	OR
Race (0=White, 1=Black)	.06 (.17)	1.88**	.76 (.18)	2.15**	.75 (.18)	2.12**
Education	-.16 (.05)	.85**	-.36 (.07)	.70**	-.37 (.08)	.69**
Income	-.07 (.05)	.94	.10 (.08)	1.11	.12 (.08)	1.13
Parents' Marital Status	-.11 (.19)	.89	-.16 (.20)	0.85	-.21 (.20)	0.81
Race x Education			.29 (.10)	1.34**	.30 (.10)	1.35**
Race x Income			-.27 (.10)	.77**	-.28 (.10)	.76**
Feels Close to In-Laws					-.23(.11)	.79*

Note. SE = standard error; OR = odds ratio.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 4
 Hierarchical Regression for Wives on Odds of Divorce across Years 1 through 16

Covariate	Model 1a		Model 2		Model 3	
	β (SE)	OR	β (SE)	OR	β (SE)	OR
Race (0=White, 1=Black)	.79 (.17)	2.20**	1.06 (.22)	2.89**	1.14 (.23)	3.11**
Education	-.25 (.05)	0.78**	-.33 (.07)	0.72**	-.33 (.07)	0.72**
Income	.01 (.05)	1.01	-.004 (.05)	1.00	.01 (.05)	1.01
Parents' Marital Status	.16 (.17)	1.18	.70 (.30)	2.01*	.71 (.31)	2.03*
Feels Close to In-Laws			-.20 (.09)	0.82*	.26 (.19)	1.30
Race x Feels Close to In-Laws					-.45 (.20)	0.64*

Note. SE = standard error; OR = odds ratio.

* p .05.

** p .01.