



# Relationships of choice: Can friendships or fictive kinships explain the race paradox in mental health?



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## ABSTRACT

African Americans typically exhibit similar or better mental health outcomes than whites, an unexpected pattern given their disproportionate exposure to psychosocial stressors. The “race paradox in mental health” has been attributed to presumed stronger social ties among blacks but there is scarce empirical research in this regard. Using data from the 2001–2003 National Survey of American Life ( $N = 4086$ ), I test whether more abundant and higher quality friendships and fictive kin relationships among African Americans (if they exist) account for the race paradox in mental health. I find few race differences in the quantity and quality of friendships and fictive kinships and these differences did not explain the race paradox in mental health. Future research should investigate other potential resilience mechanisms among African Americans to explain their relatively positive mental health outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

The overwhelming majority of research finds that blacks experience better mental health outcomes than whites. By far, the strongest and most consistent associations have been found for race differences in lifetime and 12-month psychiatric disorders. For example, data from the 1980–1983 Epidemiologic Catchment Area study (Zhang and Snowden, 1999), the 1990–1992 National Comorbidity Survey (Kessler et al., 1994; Breslau et al., 2005), the 2001–2003 National Comorbidity Survey Replication (Breslau et al., 2006), and the 2001–2003 National Survey of American Life (Williams et al., 2007a,b) all found lower rates among blacks than whites for most major psychiatric disorders. Although somewhat less consistent conclusions have been found for psychological distress (Williams et al., 1997; Bratter and Eschbach, 2005) and psychological well-being (Williams et al., 1997; Ryff et al., 2003), the preponderance of empirical evidence has determined that blacks have better mental health outcomes than whites. Collectively, these findings can be referred to as “the race paradox in mental health” because they are counterintuitive based on blacks’ historically lower socioeconomic (Mouzon, 2013) standing and disproportionate exposure to discrimination (relative to whites) in the United States.

“Relationships of choice” – that is, relationships that are not structured by blood or conjugal ties – are known to have various mental health-enhancing properties (e.g., Ellison, 1990; Taylor et al., 2001; Bagwell et al., 2005). Although the race paradox in mental health is often attributed to more supportive family relationships among blacks (an argument that has since been refuted; Mouzon, 2013), no research has examined whether relationships of choice can account for these

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paradoxical findings. The objective of this paper is to determine whether various characteristics of two chosen social relationships (i.e., friendships and fictive kin relationships) can explain the race paradox in mental health.

### 1.1. *Social support*

The protective association between social relationships and mental health has been firmly established in past literature (e.g., [Kawachi and Berkman, 2001](#); [Bertera, 2005](#)). Social relationships exert mental health-enhancing benefits both during times of emotional distress and under less stressful circumstances (buffering vs. direct effects, respectively; [Turner, 1999](#)). Although most past research has examined the receipt of social support, emerging research suggests that reciprocity of support may be a more important determinant of mental health than singular indicators of support provision or receipt. For example, those who receive more social support than they provide experience more depressive symptoms and psychological distress than those who do not ([Liang et al., 2001](#)). An earlier study found that individuals who engaged in balanced support exchange had better psychological well-being than those who only gave or only received support ([Maton, 1987](#)). These findings underscore the importance of studying the reciprocity of support exchange, not merely one-sided exchanges.

Although scholarship on social relationships spans multiple decades, newer research has uncovered nuances in the social relationships-mental health relationship, including how these processes vary across different types of social relationships. The study of relationships of choice represents a promising new direction in this regard.

### 1.2. *Friends and fictive kin: relationships of choice*

There have been myriad changes to what was once deemed the “Standard North American Family” ([Smith, 1993](#)). According to this ideological standard, a SNAF is comprised of a man (primary breadwinner) and a woman (primary caregiver) who are legally married and reside with their biological children in a single household. However, over the past half century, the United States has witnessed a precipitous decline in marriage across all demographic groups ([Pew Research Center, 2011](#)). For example, the proportion of currently married adults has dropped from 72% in 1960 to 51% in 2010; this trend is mirrored yet even more pronounced among African Americans (61% vs. 31% were married in 1960 and 2010, respectively). Moreover, African Americans have lower marital quality, higher divorce rates, and lower remarriage rates than whites ([Bramlett and Mosher, 2002](#); [Broman, 2005](#)). Taken together, these findings shed ample doubt on both the prevalence and utility of the SNAF ideological code, especially for African Americans, who largely live outside of the institution of marriage.

The exchange of social support is a conventional function of families. The hierarchical compensatory model posits that individuals first seek support from family members (i.e., spouse and children) and will subsequently turn to friendships and other social relationships if family support is not available ([Cantor, 1979](#)). Indeed, empirical research finds that married individuals report more kin in their family networks while unmarried individuals are more likely to rely on friendship and formal help ([Spitze and Ward, 2000](#)). Recent studies have affirmed the validity of the hierarchical compensatory model; for example, adults with functional limitations are more likely to rely on neighborhood support when they have infrequent contact with their family members ([Shaw, 2005](#)).

The hierarchical compensatory model is paramount to consider when examining race differences in the structure and processes of support networks because African Americans are considerably less likely than whites to become (and remain) married, a demographic trend that suggests that relationships of choice may be a more central aspect of their lives than whites. Indeed, African Americans have fewer primary group ties than whites, or networks consisting of spouses and children ([Cornwell et al., 2008](#)). Past research also indicates that African Americans are more likely than whites to report a non-spousal confidant ([Kiecolt et al., 2008](#)). Moreover, among those who are married, married blacks are more likely than married whites to also list an informal helper in their social network and are almost 2/3 less likely to rely solely on their spouses than married whites ([Feld et al., 2004](#)). A study examining emotional support among blacks who reported having a serious personal problem found that individuals who were unmarried and those with less frequent family contact were more likely to use non-kin helpers for support (friends, neighbors, and co-workers) than those who were currently married and those with less frequent contact with their family, demonstrating clear support for the hierarchical compensatory model ([Taylor et al., 1997](#)). Others assert a more harmonious and compensatory partnership between family relationships and friendships such that family members are more likely to provide instrumental and financial support while friends are more likely to contribute emotional support and companionship in leisurely activities ([Taylor and Chatters, 1986](#); [Zettel-Watson and Rook, 2009](#)). Regardless of the type of relationship under examination, African Americans have more frequent interaction with members of their social networks than whites ([Ajrouch et al., 2001](#); [Cornwell, 2008](#)); frequency of contact is positively associated with mental health ([Lin and Peek, 1999](#)).

An important extension of the conventional SNAF model that is often overlooked in contemporary scholarship is the consideration of friendships and fictive kin. Fictive kin are individuals who are not related to others either through blood or marriage but who are nevertheless regarded as kin members. These relationships can be considered a hybrid of two commonly studied social relationships - family relationships and friendships - that lie on a continuum between both relationships in terms of obligation, emotional rewards, and permanence. Friendships and fictive kinships receive far less attention in the literature than family relationships but they are important to consider for two reasons. First, both exemplify what recent research calls “intentional families,” a concept often used to explain the deliberate formation of (non-familial) social networks among gays and lesbians - relationships whose functions ultimately mirror those conventionally provided by

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