Articles

# Spouses' Perceptions of Network Interference in the Early Years of Marriage

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## Abstract

In early marriage, couples are intricately tied to their social networks and are influenced by important connections, social interactions, and socialization processes within those networks. Most of the research on the links between social networks and marital processes has focused on the positive effects or support married couples receive from their friends and family. The present study examined the links between perceptions of interference from family and friends and newlyweds' reports of marital well-being in the early years of marriage. The contexts of both gender and race were explored to gain a better understanding of how interference from family and friends might be linked to marital well-being. Data from Black American and White American couples in their early years of marriage were analyzed. The findings revealed that perceptions of interference from friends were negatively associated with marital well-being for both Black American and White American wives. Husbands' perceptions of interference from their wives' friends were negatively linked to marital well-being, but only for Black American husbands. We offer several explanations for the differential links between perceptions of interference and marital well-being, including the role of relationships in self-identity and the negative spillover effect of external stressors.

*Keywords:* networks, marital well-being, gender, race

When you marry someone you don't only gain a spouse but you also inherit his/her family and friends. Research has shown that family and friends influence the nature and stability of romantic relationships (Felmlee, 2001; Fiori et al., 2017; Sullivan & Davila, 2010). The influence of family and friends can be positive or negative; however, research on the impact of family and friends on marital processes has largely focused on the positive effects or support married couples receive (Sprecher, Felmlee, Schmeeckle, & Shu, 2006). It is also important to investigate the possible negative influence of family and friends on marital outcomes because interference from friends and family can be a source of tension in romantic relationships and a contributing factor to divorce (Fiori et al., 2018; Hawkins, Willoughby, & Doherty, 2012; Waller, 2008).

Schramm, Marshall, Harris, and Lee (2005) studied the problem areas that newlyweds have in the first year of marriage and found that parents/in-laws and lack of time spent together were among the most commonly reported problems for both husbands and wives. Both of these individual challenges were included in categories of problem areas that predicted declines in marital satisfaction and marital adjustment among couples married an

average of five months. In another study by Waller (2008), 60% of unstable couples and 33% of stable couples reported that network members were a source of interference in their relationship. It is clear that integration with family and friends has been identified as a common dilemma in intimate relationships and a source of tension among couples, particularly in the early years of marriage (Erbert, 2000).

Similarly, although most of the research that has focused on the negative influence of family and friends has primarily examined samples of dating couples in college (Felmlee, 2001; Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, &Willetts, 2002), interference from family and friends has been reported retrospectively as a source of tension in marriage and a contributing factor to relationship dissolution (Felmlee, 2001; Schramm et al., 2005). Given that contact with family and friends is linked to marital outcomes and marital well-being in the early years of marriage is associated with divorce over the marital life course (Birditt, Hope, Brown, & Orbuch, 2012), this study assesses how, and for who, interference from family and friends impacts spouses' marital well-being in early marriage. In addition, the contexts of gender and race have been identified as important factors in understanding the influence of family and friends on marital outcomes (Burger & Milardo, 1995; Orbuch, Bauermeister, Brown, & McKinley, 2013). More specifically, our sample consists of Black American and White American couples. First, we examine the links between interference from family and friends and newlyweds' perceptions of marital well-being. Second, we assess whether these links vary given the contexts of gender and race.

## The Social Network

A person's social network consists of family members, friends, and others with whom one interacts and has been found to significantly impact the development and stability of romantic relationships (Bryant & Conger, 1999; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). According to the Convoy Model of Social Relations (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), a person's social network is the structure within which support (i.e. affect, affirmation, and aid) is given and received. The quantity, quality, frequency, and adequacy of support varies based on personal and situational factors that change over the lifespan. These social networks can provide partners with relationship advice and/or individual or relationship-specific support (Sprecher et al., 2002). Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) studied the influence of the social network on the quality and stability of dating relationships and found that perceptions of support from family and friends significantly predicted love, satisfaction, and commitment. Similarly, in a study examining the impact of network support on marital success, Bryant and Conger (1999) found that relationship-specific support from family and friends significantly predicted marital satisfaction, stability, and commitment. In addition, Orbuch and colleagues (2013) found that close ties with in-laws significantly predicted the likelihood of divorce over 16 years of marriage.

### Social Network Interference

Marriage has been described as a "greedy institution" that weakens relationships with parents (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008) and social networks (Johnson & Milardo, 1984). Married adults are less likely than single adults to communicate with, provide help to, and receive help from their network (Sarkisian, & Gerstel, 2016). When individuals begin romantic relationships and/or marry, they spend less time with the members of their social network (social withdrawal). As a result, some members may be resentful and, therefore, intentionally interfere with the relationship (Johnson & Milardo, 1984). In a study of social network influence on relationship stability, Felmlee (2001) reported that participants openly acknowledged their friend's disapproval of their romantic relationship was due to the time spent with romantic partners, reducing the time available to spend with their friend. Consequently, a disapproving network member may interfere with the relationship by providing inappropriate

advice or derogatory information about the partner, or by failing to show any support for the relationship. Felmlee found that 36% of participants who experienced a break up indicated that members of their social network influenced the breakup. Felmlee also found that closeness to a best friend and the centrality of a social group positively predicted relationship dissolution.

Sharing inappropriate relationship advice or derogatory information about a partner has been found to negatively impact marriage (Julien, Markman, Léveillé, Chartrand, & Bégin, 1994). In a study examining wives' conversations with close friends regarding marital distress, Julien and colleagues (1994), found that wives exhibited increased negative affect about their husbands when friends made negative statements about their husbands or their marriage. In another study, Julien and Markman (1991) found that the more family members and friends who spouses discussed their marital problems with, the lower their marital adjustment. Discussing marital problems with friends is particularly damaging to relationships when individuals talk more to their friends than their partners (Jensen & Rauer, 2014).

In addition to friends and family intentionally interfering with romantic relationships, the interference could be a result of the dilemma of balancing time supporting social network members versus time with romantic partner (Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Lawson & Thompson, 1995). The number of people available to provide support is the same number of people to whom support is required to give. The time needed to support family and friends may interfere with marital obligations, including spending quality time with one's spouse. This interference may, therefore, create tension in the marriage. Gary (1986) found that spouses' disagreements on how to spend leisure time, the amount of time they spent away from home, and the amount of time they spent with friends were cited as common topics of marital conflict. Similarly, Lawson and Thompson (1995) studied perceptions of marital tensions that lead to divorce and found that time and resources spent on extended family members were cited as common issues. Participants reported that their former spouses felt that their marriages and families were not prioritized above the needs of their family of origin, and they were unable to find a satisfactory balance in meeting the needs of their spouse versus the obligations they felt to spend time with and support family. Therefore, interference from family and friends may have implications for spouses' outcomes, including their marital well-being.

## Social Networks and the Context of Gender

Evidence indicates that men and women differ in their expressions of emotional intimacy with their friends and family. Agnew, Loving, and Drigotas (2001) reported that women are more likely to self-disclose to friends, reveal more personal details of their lives, and are less likely to censor the information revealed than men. Relatedly, Fehr (1996) reported that women and men differ in the activities and topics of conversation with their friends. In addition, women are more likely than men to spend time simply talking and discussing their relationships and private matters, whereas men are more likely to engage in activities and discuss impersonal matters such as sports (Fehr, 1996). Helms, Crouter, and McHale (2003) also found that women were more likely to discuss marital issues with a friend than with their spouse, whereas men were more likely to speak with their wives rather than friends about marital issues.

In addition, research shows that there are gender differences in the function, quality, and impact of social networks by gender. Women's relationships are more closely monitored by network members than men's relationships (Sprecher et al., 2002), and women are more likely than men to report low quality social networks (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007). Further, research by Burger and Milardo (1995) indicated that, for wives, higher levels of

contact with family was associated with more marital conflict, whereas husbands' contact with family, especially their fathers, was associated with higher levels of love for their wives and less marital conflict. Similarly, in a study of married couples, Orbuch, Bauermeister, Brown, and McKinley (2013) discovered that close in-law ties decreased the likelihood of divorce for husbands but increased the likelihood of divorce for wives. These findings suggest that the context of gender may lead to differential perceptions of social network interference and that the links between social network interference and marital outcomes may differ by gender.

## Social Networks and the Context of Race

The perception of network interference and the effects on marital well-being also may vary given the context of race, and more specifically for this study may vary among Black American and White American couples. In a study by Ajrouch, Antonucci, and Janevic (2001), they discovered that Black Americans have smaller networks comprised primarily of family members with more family contact than White Americans. Race differences also have been found in network overlap, the extent to which couples share the same network members. Kennedy, Jackson, Green, Bradbury, and Karney (2015) found that Black American couples had significantly lower network overlap than White American couples. Black American couples are also more likely to have an individual in their network who has a positive relationship with one spouse but a negative or neutral relationship with the other spouse (Jackson, Kennedy, Bradbury, & Karney, 2014).

Similarly, Timmer, Veroff, and Hatchett (1996) reported that Black Americans perceived less network support than White Americans but reported more contact and less conflict with family than White Americans. Birditt and Antonucci (2007) also found significant racial differences in the self-reported relationship quality of social networks. In addition, Black Americans experience more frequent changes in network composition than do White Americans (Cornwell, 2015). Black Americans were less likely to report having a best friend, and, when compared to White Americans without best friends, Black Americans were more likely to report having low quality networks (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007). However, although Black Americans have smaller and lower quality social networks than White Americans, they are less likely than White Americans to report that their relationships with family was a cause of marital tension or conflict (Orbuch et al., 2013). These findings suggest that the context of race may lead to different perceptions of social network interference and subsequent differential links between social network interference and marital outcomes by race.

## Social Networks and Relationship Type

The effects of social networks on marital outcomes also may vary by network type. According to Fischer, Sollie, Sorell, and Green (1989), the social network of married and engaged couples was more likely to consist of family members than friends, compared to those of single adults. However, Seal, Doherty, and Harris (2016) found that newlyweds were more likely to confide in friends rather than family members about their marital problems. Further, the amount of time adults spent with friends may drop after marriage (Larson & Bradney, 1988). However, Larson and Bradney (1988) argued that the time spent with friends can be a "reprieve from the demands of work and family" and time for personal enjoyment. According to Dickson-Markman and Markman (1988), the type of network may also influence marital satisfaction differentially by gender. They found that husbands' marital satisfaction was largely influenced by support from friends, whereas wives' marital satisfaction was primarily influenced by family support. Similarly, Fiori et al. (2017) found that different network types had differential impact on marital quality. These variations in network function and frequency of contact may lead to different perceptions of network interference and subsequent associations with marital outcomes by type of network.

## Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine the links between social network interference from both family and friends and marital well-being in early marriage. The study contributes to the literature by expanding our knowledge of the understudied area of social network interference and marital processes. We hypothesized that social network interference would be negatively linked to marital well-being. However, considering the previous literature on the gender differences in the intimacy, function, quality, and impact of social networks, we hypothesized that the link would be stronger for wives than husbands. Although there are racial differences in the composition, quality, and impact of social networks, the literature findings are not conclusive. Therefore, we did not make specific predictions about the context of race and the links between social network interference and marital well-being. Lastly, because relationships with friends are considered distractions from family life, we hypothesized that interference from friends would be more strongly linked to marital well-being than interference from family, particularly for wives.

# Method

## Sample and Procedures

The data for this study were from Year 3 of the Early Years of Marriage (EYM) project (see Orbuch et al., 2002). The EYM project was designed to focus on experiences within Black and White American married couples and how they might differ. In order to be eligible for the EYM study, both members of the couple had to be willing to participate, of the same race, in their first marriage and the wife had to be 35 years or younger. Husbands and wives were interviewed in their homes separately and as a couple, by a race-matched interviewer.

In Year 3 of the project, data were collected from 264 couples (122 Black American couples and 142 White American couples). On average, husbands were 29 years old and wives were age 27. Among husbands, 8% did not complete high school, 33% had a high school diploma, 32% had some college, 20% had a college degree, and 7% did not report their education, with an overall average of 13.46 years of formal education ($M$ = 13.46, $SD$ = 1.92). Among wives, 9% did not complete high school, 28% had a high school diploma, 36% had some college, 21% had a college degree, and 6% did not report their education, with an average 13.50 years of formal education ($M$ = 13.50, $SD$ = 1.95). Fifteen percent of husbands and wives reported household incomes of less than $20,000, 41% reported $20,000 to $39,999, 32% reported $40,000 to $59,999, and 12% reported $60,000 or more, with an average income of $38,668. In addition, 24% of husbands and wives reported that they had children (ranging from 1 child to 6 children), and 62% of wives and 92% of husbands were employed outside the home for pay.

## Measures

### Sociodemographic Variables

Several sociodemographic variables (i.e., race, gender, work status, household income, and education) were included in this study because of their relevance in the literature to the prediction of marital well-being (Heaton, 2002; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). *Race* was coded as 0 (Black American) or 1 (White American). Interviewers indicated if the participant was the wife (1) or husband (2) in order to track *gender*. *Work status* was coded if the respondent worked outside of the home or

not (0 = no, 1 = yes). For *household income*, participants reported the income received by all members of their household by choosing among 22 categorical options ranging from no income to $75,000 or more. Respondent's income was then coded as the midpoint of the selected category to approximate a continuous variable. *Education* was the highest grade of school that participants completed in number of years, with options ranging from 0 to 17 or more years.

### Social Network Interference

There were four sources of perceived social network interference questions: *spouse's family, respondent's family, spouse's friends, and respondent's friends*. To assess interference from spouse's family, respondents were asked, "How often did your (wife's/husband's) family or how either of you felt about them interfere with your married life?" Interference from the respondent's family was assessed by asking respondents, "How often did your own family or how either of you felt about them interfere with your married life?" Respondents also were asked, "How often did things your (wife/husband) did with or for (his/her) friends interfere with your married life," and "How often did things you did with or for your friends interfere with your married life" to assess interference from spouse's friends and respondent's friends respectively. Participants' responses ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 3 (*Often*) on each of these interference variables.

### Marital Well-Being

Marital well-being was computed based on the average of 5 items (α = .88 for husbands and α = .90 for wives) with a higher mean score representing greater marital well-being. This measure was initially developed by Crohan and Veroff (1989) and has high construct validity (Badr & Acitelli, 2008; Matthews, Del Priore, Acitelli, & Barnes-Farrell, 2006; Oggins, Veroff, & Leber, 1993). The first two items were, "Taking things altogether, how would you describe your marriage?" and "When you think about your marriage and what each of you puts into it, and gets out of it, how happy do you feel?" (1 = *not too happy*, 4 = *very happy*). The third item was, "All in all, how satisfied are you with your marriage?" (1 = *not very satisfied*, 4 = *very satisfied*). The last two items were, "How certain would you say that two of you will be married five years from now?" and "How stable do you feel your marriage is?" (1 = *not certain/stable at all*, 4 = *very certain/stable*).

# Results

## Preliminary Analyses

We first examined racial differences in all sociodemographic, network interference, and marital well-being variables for wives and husbands using $t$ and $\chi^2$ tests (see Table 1). Among wives, Black American wives reported lower household income, more interference from their own friends, and lower marital well-being compared to White American wives. Among husbands, Black American husbands reported lower household income, more interference from their wives' friends, and lower marital well-being compared to White American husbands. We then examined the correlations among all study variables for wives and husbands and found multicollinearity would not be a concern for subsequent analyses ($r$s ≤ .54). As shown in Table 2, correlations were as expected. Greater reported interference from wives' and husbands' own and their spouses' friends was associated with lower marital well-being. However, husbands' and wives' own and their spouses' family interference were not significantly related to marital well-being. Higher household income and education were associated with greater

Table 1

*Race Differences on Study Variables for Wives and Husbands*

| Variable | Overall | | White | | Black | | df | t or χ² |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| **Wives** | | | | | | | | |
| Income | 37,963 | 18,459 | 40,416 | 18,045 | 35,119 | 18,605 | 242 | 2.25* |
| Education | 13.50 | 1.95 | 13.44 | 2.02 | 13.57 | 1.89 | 246 | -0.52 |
| Work status | 62% | | 66% | | 56% | | 1 | 2.90 |
| Spouse's family interference | 2.15 | 1.31 | 2.25 | 1.29 | 2.03 | 1.33 | 246 | 1.33 |
| Own family interference | 2.21 | 1.33 | 2.20 | 1.32 | 2.22 | 1.34 | 246 | -0.09 |
| Spouse's friend interference | 2.01 | 1.25 | 1.96 | 1.24 | 2.06 | 1.25 | 246 | -0.62 |
| Own friend Interference | 1.81 | 1.11 | 1.68 | 1.01 | 1.96 | 1.19 | 246 | -2.00* |
| Marital well-being | 3.49 | 0.58 | 3.62 | 0.44 | 3.32 | 0.68 | 260 | 4.28** |
| **Husbands** | | | | | | | | |
| Income | 39,330 | 18,509 | 41,805 | 18,593 | 36,460 | 18,071 | 242 | 2.27** |
| Education | 13.46 | 1.92 | 13.59 | 1.99 | 13.32 | 1.84 | 243 | 1.11 |
| Work status | 92% | | 92% | | 91% | | 1 | 0.17 |
| Spouse's family interference | 2.02 | 1.31 | 2.08 | 1.32 | 1.95 | 1.31 | 242 | 0.76 |
| Own family interference | 1.98 | 1.15 | 2.07 | 1.14 | 1.88 | 1.16 | 243 | 1.30 |
| Spouse's friend interference | 1.58 | 1.04 | 1.35 | 0.80 | 1.84 | 1.22 | 243 | -3.77*** |
| Own friend Interference | 2.30 | 1.21 | 2.25 | 1.15 | 2.35 | 1.29 | 243 | -0.64 |
| Marital well-being | 3.58 | 0.51 | 3.71 | 0.36 | 3.43 | 0.62 | 257 | 4.55*** |

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2

*Correlations of Study Variables for Wives and Husbands*

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Spouse's family interference | **.26***** | .47*** | .18** | .19** | -.07 | .04 | .02 |
| 2. Own family interference | .47*** | **.25***** | .10 | .28*** | -.10 | .02 | .04 |
| 3. Spouse's friend interference | .18** | .01 | **.02** | .37*** | -.34*** | -.09 | -.12† |
| 4. Own friend interference | .19** | .28*** | .37*** | **.18**** | -.23*** | -.11† | -.11† |
| 5. Marital well-being | -.07 | -.10 | -.34*** | -.29*** | **.58***** | -22*** | .11† |
| 6. Household income | -.03 | .02 | -.08 | .03 | .23*** | **.84***** | .46*** |
| 7. Education | -.12 | .04 | -.12† | -.04 | .18** | .54*** | **.59***** |

*Note.* Correlations for wives are on the lower diagonal. Correlations for husbands are on the upper diagonal. Correlations between husbands and wives are reported in bold on the diagonal.

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

marital well-being among wives and husbands. Lastly, all study variables, except spouses' friends' interference, were positively correlated between wives and husbands.

We then conducted two-way analysis of variances (ANOVAs) to examine whether family and friend network interference and marital well-being differed by gender, race, and gender by race (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). First, for family interference, we found that interference from one's own family differed as a function of gender, $F(1, 493) = 4.44$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $p = .04$, but not race. Compared to husbands, wives reported

greater interference from their own family. In contrast, interference from their spouses' family did not differ by gender or race.

Next, we examined interference from one's own and one's spouses' friends. For interference from one's own friends, there was a significant gender difference, $F(1, 493) = 21.47$, $\eta^2 = .04$ $p < .001$, with husbands reporting greater interference from their own friends compared to wives, as well as a marginal race difference, $F(1, 493) = 3.28$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $p = .07$, such that Black American spouses experienced more interference from their own friends compared to White American spouses. In addition, there were differences by gender, $F(1, 493) = 16.28$, $\eta^2 = .03$, $p < .001$, and race, $F(1, 493) = 8.21$, $\eta^2 = .02$, $p = .004$, as well as a marginal interaction between gender and race, $F(1, 493) = 3.64$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $p = .06$, on reported interference from their spouses' friends. Wives experienced more interference from their spouses' friends compared to husbands, and Black American respondents reported greater interference from their spouses' friends than White American respondents. The gender X race marginal interaction revealed that White American husbands experienced the least amount of interference from their spouses' friends compared to Black American and White American wives and Black American Husbands.

Finally, we examined whether marital well-being differed by gender and race. Significant gender, $F(1, 521) = 7.27$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $p = .04$, and race, $F(1, 521) = 38.61$, $\eta^2 = .07$, $p < .001$, differences emerged. Husbands reported higher marital well-being than wives, and White American spouses reported higher marital well-being than Black American spouses.

## Regression Analyses

We then used multiple regression analyses to test the links between the social network interference variables and marital well-being, as well as the moderating effects of race on their associations. We first tested a model (Model 1) that included only the sociodemographic variables (i.e., race, income, education, and work status). Then, in Model 2, we included the sociodemographic variables and the family and friend social network interference variables (i.e., interference from one's own family, spouse's family, own friends, and spouse's friends). Given our interest in understanding the context of race, we then computed a third model (Model 3), which included the sociodemographic variables, the four social network interference variables, and all possible Race × Interference interactions. It also should be noted that we ran the analyses with the interference from family and friend variables separately, but the findings did not differ from the Model 2 and Model 3 results. All models were run separately for husbands and wives. Prior to conducting the analyses, the four social network interference variables were mean-centered to avoid high multicollinearity with the interaction terms and to improve interpretability (Aiken & West, 1991). Social network interference by race interaction terms were computed as the product of the mean centered social network interference variables and race (i.e., 4 interaction terms). Significant interactions were probed using a simple slopes analysis and were then plotted at one standard deviation above and below the mean to depict the moderating effects.

### Social Network Interference and Marital Well-Being Among Wives

We first assessed the links between the sociodemographic variables, social network interference variables, and marital well-being for wives. As shown in Table 3, the results of Model 1 with only the sociodemographic variables (i.e., race, income, education, and work status) indicated that race and income were significantly linked to marital well-being. Black American wives reported lower marital well-being than White American wives, and

Table 3

*Regression Analyses Predicting Marital Well-Being by Source of Interference as Reported by Wives (N = 243)*

| Predictor | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | | Model 3 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | β | *b* | *SE* | β | *b* | *SE* | β |
| Race | .26 | .07 | .23*** | .23 | .07 | .20** | .24 | .07 | .21** |
| Income | .00 | .00 | .17* | .00 | .00 | .15* | .00 | .00 | .15+ |
| Education | .03 | .02 | .11 | .02 | .02 | .08 | .02 | .02 | .08 |
| Work status | -.09 | .08 | -.08 | -.04 | .08 | -.04 | -.05 | .08 | -.04 |
| Spouse's family interference | | | | -.02 | .03 | -.05 | -.05 | .04 | -.11 |
| Own family interference | | | | .02 | .03 | .06 | .02 | .04 | .04 |
| Spouse's friend interference | | | | -.12 | .03 | -.25*** | -.12 | .04 | -.26** |
| Own friend interference | | | | -.09 | .03 | -.17** | -.12 | .05 | -.23** |
| Race x Spouse's family interference | | | | | | | .05 | .06 | .09 |
| Race x Own family interference | | | | | | | .02 | .06 | .03 |
| Race x Spouse's friend interference | | | | | | | .01 | .06 | .01 |
| Race x Own friend interference | | | | | | | .07 | .07 | .09 |
| | $R^2$ = .11 | | | $R^2$ = .22 | | | $R^2$ = .24 | | |
| | $F(4, 238) = 7.45, p < .001$ | | | $F(8, 234) = 8.46, p < .001$ | | | $F(12, 230) = 5.93, p < .001$ | | |

higher household income was associated with higher marital well-being. The results of Model 2 with the socio-demographic and social network interference variables showed greater interference from wives' own and their husbands' friends was significantly associated with lower marital well-being, whereas interference from their own and their husbands' family was not significantly related to their marital well-being. Finally, Model 3 with the sociodemographic, social network interference, and Race X Interference interaction variables revealed that race did not moderate the links between wives' own and their spouses' family and friend social network inference on their marital well-being.

## Social Network Interference and Marital Well-Being Among Husbands

Next, we tested the links between the sociodemographic variables, social network variables and marital well-being for husbands (see Table 4). Similar to wives, Model 1 with the sociodemographic variables revealed that race and household income were significantly associated with marital well-being for husbands. Black American husbands reported lower marital well-being than White American husbands, and higher income was related to higher marital well-being. The results from Model 2 with the sociodemographic and social network interference variables showed that greater interference from their wives' friends was related to lower marital well-being. Interference from their own friends, as well as their own and their wives' family, were not linked to husbands' marital well-being. In Model 3, we tested whether the associations between social network interference differed by race, which revealed a significant interaction between race and interference from their wives' friends. A simple slopes analysis indicated that White American husbands' marital well-being did not change based on interference from their wives' friends, *b* = -.03, *SE* = .05, β = -.05, *p* = .64. However, for Black American husbands, greater interference from their wives' friends was associated with lower marital well-being, *b* = -.18, *SE* = .04, β = -.36, *p* < .001. Figure 1 illustrates that at low levels of interference from their wives' friends (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean), Black American and White American husbands reported similar marital well-being. However, at high

Table 4

*Regression Analyses Predicting Marital Well-Being by Source of Interference as Reported by Husbands (N = 239)*

| Predictor | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | | Model 3 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | β | *b* | *SE* | β | *b* | *SE* | β |
| Race | .25 | .06 | .24*** | .20 | .06 | .20** | .21 | .06 | .21** |
| Income | .00 | .00 | .16* | .00 | .00 | .14† | .00 | .00 | .14* |
| Education | .00 | .02 | .02 | -.01 | .02 | -.03 | -.01 | .02 | -.04 |
| Work Status | .15 | .13 | .07 | .22 | .13 | .11† | .23 | .13 | .12† |
| Spouse's family interference | | | | .00 | .03 | -.00 | -.00 | .04 | -.01 |
| Own family interference | | | | -.03 | .03 | -.06 | -.06 | .05 | -.13 |
| Spouse's friend interference | | | | -.12 | .03 | -.23** | -.18 | .04 | -.36*** |
| Own friend interference | | | | -.04 | .03 | -.10 | -.00 | .04 | -.01 |
| Race x Spouse's family interference | | | | | | | -.00 | .05 | -.00 |
| Race x Own family interference | | | | | | | .05 | .06 | .09 |
| Race x Spouse's friend interference | | | | | | | .15 | .07 | .18* |
| Race x Own friend interference | | | | | | | -.07 | .06 | -.12(.05) |
| | $R^2$ = .11 | | | $R^2$ = .20 | | | $R^2$ = .22 | | |
| | $F(4, 235)$ = 7.51, $p < .001$ | | | $F(8, 230)$ = 7.27, $p < .001$ | | | $F(12, 226)$ = 5.39, $p < .001$ | | |

*Note.* Race: 0 = Black wives, 1 = White wives; Work status: 0 = No, 1 = Yes. All interference variables were centered at their means.
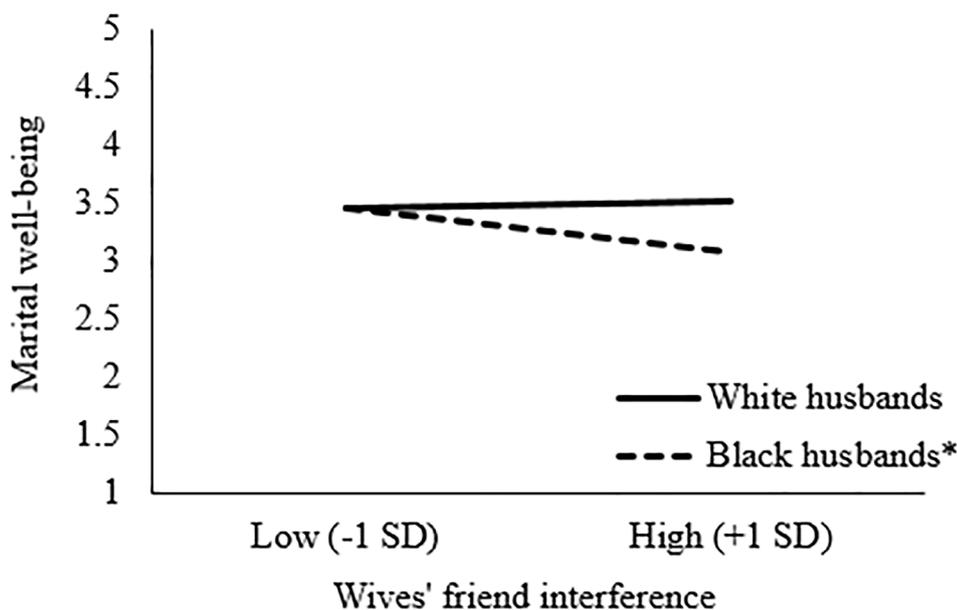†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.



*Figure 1.* A visual representation of the association between social network interference from wives' friends and marital well-being by race among husbands.

levels of interference from their wives' friends (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean), Black American husbands reported significantly lower marital well-being than White American husbands.

# Discussion

Relationships do not exist within a vacuum; the stability and quality of relationships are influenced by the social networks that surround them. The current study examined the links between social network interference and marital well-being and whether these links varied by gender and race. The findings demonstrate that the contexts of gender and race, as well as the source of the interference, have important implications for wives' and husbands' marital well-being in the early years of marriage.

The results indicated that social network interference was linked to marital well-being, however, the links were dependent on the source of interference. Perceptions of interference from friends were negatively linked to the marital well-being of husbands and wives, with higher levels of interference from friends being associated with lower marital well-being. Surprisingly, perceptions of interference from family were not linked to marital well-being in our study. We argue that, similar to Larson and Bradney (1988), spouses may be spending more time with friends than family, particularly because time spent with friends is considered a "reprieve from the demands of work and family." Therefore, the newlywed couples in this study could be spending too much time with friends and leaving their spouses feeling as though they are not a priority, which leads to lower marital well-being. This argument is also consistent with Schramm and colleagues (2005) who found that the lack of time spent together as a couple was among the most commonly reported problems for both husbands and wives in the early years of marriage.

## Social Network Interference and Marital Well-Being Among Wives

This study also investigated the links between social network interference and marital well-being given the contexts of gender and race. Among wives, the results were similar by race. Among both Black American and White American wives, greater perceived interference from their husbands' friends and their own friends were linked to lower marital well-being. We propose that these results are consistent with previous research. Women are likely to openly discuss their relationships with their friends (Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003), and their relationships are closely monitored by network members (Sprecher et al. 2002), leaving women susceptible to the influence of their friends' opinions and feedback. In addition, a woman's self-identity is significantly more likely than a man's identity to be contingent upon the success of their relationships (Cross & Madson, 1997; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999), and, therefore, they are very sensitive to any perceived threats to their relationships.

## Social Network Interference and Marital Well-Being Among Husbands

For husbands, the links between interference from friends and marital well-being depended on whose friends were being evaluated and the context of race. First, husbands' reports of interference from their friends were not linked to the marital well-being for Black American husbands nor White American husbands. However, husbands' reports of interference from their wives' friends were negatively linked to marital well-being, but only for Black American husbands. These findings are in stark contrast to the non-significant links for White American husbands.

We offer several speculations for these findings. First, research shows that Black American couples are more egalitarian in the sharing of household responsibilities and marital attitudes than White American couples (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997). Therefore, it might be the case that Black American husbands are more sensitive than White American husbands when their wives are spending more time with their friends and less time with house-

hold tasks and responsibilities. In addition, according to Fiori et al. (2018) at least in early marriage, husbands' negative perceptions of wives' friends were more predictive of divorce than were wives' negative perceptions of husbands' friends. Research also shows that Black American couples are more likely to have network members who maintain a positive relationship with one spouse and a negative relationship with the other spouse (Jackson et al., 2014). For these findings, the friend the wife is spending time with may be someone the husband doesn't like. Second, Black American men are more likely than White American men to encounter inequities outside of the household (McCord et al., 2018), and external stressors can have a negative spillover effect on the perceptions of dynamics within marriage (Neff & Karney, 2004). This disadvantaged position of power outside the relationship may make them more sensitive in general to external stress and interference outside of the household, particularly from their wives' friends who may be giving feedback and interfering in their marital lives, which may spill over into the household and negatively impact their marital perceptions. Lastly, there could be a statistical explanation. On average, Black American husbands reported more interference from their wives' friends compared to White American husbands (as shown by mean differences in the t-tests). Not only are Black American men more sensitive and impacted by wives' friends' interference (as suggested by their egalitarian roles in the household, as well as their disadvantaged positions outside of the household), they are also experiencing spousal friend interference at higher rates compared to White American husbands. In the end, all of these explanations are speculative and need to be tested in future research.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

We acknowledge that there are several limitations of our study. First, we recognize that we are examining self-report data from married spouses at only one point in time. This snapshot does not necessarily reflect their perceptions from year to year. Future research should examine how perceptions of network interference change over the course of marriage and how it impacts other marital outcomes and processes, such as communication, conflict, and divorce. We also assessed a global interference measure from family and friends, but this interference might vary by familial domains, such as parenting style, participation in established traditions, celebrations, and leisure activities within the extended family and as a couple. Furthermore, given the cross-sectional nature of our data, we cannot assess whether our findings point to perceptions of network interference leading to changes in marital well-being, or that marital well-being directly influences perceptions of interference from network members.

We must also note that the measures of network interference in this study were based on single items. Future research needs to include multi-item measures of interference to more accurately determine the meaning of network interference for spouses and the explanation for its link to marital well-being. Specific items can assess negative advice received from network members and reports of actual time spent with network members.

It is also important to explore why perceptions of interference from family were not linked to marital well-being in this study. The items assessing perceptions of inference from family members were not identical to those measuring perceptions of interference from friends in this study. Future research should include consistent measures between network sources to support the findings from the current study and explore the differential links between interference from friends versus interference from family on marital well-being. In addition, future research also needs to consider other contexts (e.g., culture) for how family and friend interference might influence wives' and husbands' marital well-being. For instance, people from collectivistic cultures have greater acceptance of parental influence in choosing a spouse and higher levels of devotion between family members,

than those who have a more individualistic orientation (Bejanyan, Marshall, & Ferenczi, 2015). Bejanyan, Marshall, and Ferenczi (2015) found that acceptance of parental influence and devotion to family were both linked to marital commitment.

## Conclusion

In early marriage, couples are intricately tied to their social networks, but these connections are not always positive. In this study, we found perceptions of interference from friends to be negatively linked to marital well-being. Among Black and White American wives, greater perceived interference from their husbands' friends and their own friends was linked to lower marital well-being. In contrast, only Black American husbands' perceived interference from their wives' friends was negatively linked to marital well-being. This study demonstrated the importance of examining social network inference in the contexts of race and gender to provide a more nuanced understanding of how and for whom network interference relates to marital well-being in the early years of marriage.

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