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Partner Support Behaviors and Relationship Quality in Interracial and Intraracial Black Romantic Relationships

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Data and materials are available at https://osf.io/9pfkw/. We would like to thank Isis Settles for reviewing and providing feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. We would also like to thank Allison Youtt and Annie MacIntosh for help with data collection and data cleaning, as well as Esther Merguson for helping with qualitative data analysis. We have no known conflicts of interest to report.
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Abstract

We used a convergent, mixed-methods design to understand associations between partner behaviors and relationship quality among people in interracial and intraracial romantic relationships. Across two samples, 224 individuals (including 55 couples) who were in a relationship in which they and/or their partner identified as Black completed measures of perceived partner responsiveness, partner responses to stress, and relationship quality. Participants in the first sample also provided open-ended responses about the role of race in their relationship. Participants who reported higher partner responsiveness, more supportive partner responses to their stress, better overall dyadic coping, and fewer unsupportive partner responses to their stress reported higher relationship quality. The strength of the associations for perceived partner responsiveness and partner responses to stress with relationship quality did not differ based on the racial composition of the relationship. Qualitative responses revealed additional

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1111/pere.12562

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support processes and barriers to support that may be unique to different relationship compositions. These findings expand our understanding of the most effective support behaviors that Black individuals and their romantic partners use in their relationships and illuminate how support processes might differ depending on an individual's race and the race of their partner.

Keywords: romantic relationships, interracial, support, couples, Black individuals, mixed-methods

Statement of Relevance: The types of support that are most beneficial for romantic relationships may differ across people and contexts; however, most research in this area has been conducted with White, same-race couples, limiting our understanding of how effective different types of support are depending on an individual and their partner's race. This original, empirical study examines how partner support effectiveness differs between Black and non-Black individuals, as well as between Black individuals in interracial and same-race relationships.

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Partner Support Behaviors and Relationship Quality in Interracial and Intraracial Black Romantic Relationships

Black individuals often face unique, chronic stressors, including racial discrimination, health disparities, and financial inequality (Berger & Sarnyai, 2015; Laurencin & Walker, 2020; Lee et al., 2016). Such stressors negatively affect not only the well-being of Black individuals, but also the functioning of their romantic relationships (Doyle & Molix, 2014; Lavner et al., 2018). To combat these negative effects, Black couples may employ unique coping strategies and methods of support (Orbuch et al., 2002). Despite the importance of understanding the dynamics of support in Black individuals' romantic relationships, this topic has remained largely understudied.

Most research on romantic relationships has been conducted on White couples, obscuring the unique challenges, strengths, and experiences of other racial groups (Randall & Curran, 2023). Although research has examined relationship outcomes as a function of race (Raley et al., 2015; Bulanda & Brown, 2007), the experiences of marginalized groups such as Black individuals' are rarely centered. A notable exception is Bryant and colleagues' (2010) theoretical framework of Black marital outcomes, which highlights external stressors as particularly important determinants of Black individuals' relationship outcomes. The authors note how stressful events can impair relationship quality by hindering adaptive relationship processes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For instance, when people experience stressors external to the relationship, such as discrimination, they may have more difficulty regulating their emotions and may behave more negatively toward their partner (Doyle & Molix, 2014; Lavner et al., 2018), which could negatively impact their relationships.

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Although Black individuals may be more likely than those of other racial groups to face stressors that can affect their relationship functioning, the Black marital outcomes model (Bryant et al., 2010) acknowledges the ways that psychosocial resources such as partner support may buffer these negative effects. Partner support can buffer the negative effects of stress for a broad array of groups (e.g., Schwarzer & Leppin, 1989), but the high rates of stress and discrimination faced by Black individuals (Duru et al., 2012; Soto et al., 2011) may make partner support particularly important for these individuals (Rice et al., 2023). Indeed, qualitative evidence suggests that Black couples identify mutual partner support as a key aspect of their romantic relationships (Chaney, 2010; Lincoln & Chae, 2010; McNeil et al., 2014; Barton et al., 2018). Additionally, Black individuals who are experiencing racial discrimination may show even more support to their partners compared to times when they do not experience racial discrimination (Clavél et al., 2017; Murdock & Wood, 2022). Further, certain types of partner support may be more important to the relationship outcomes of Black, compared to White, couples (Orbuch et al., 2002).

Black Individuals in Interracial Versus Intraracial Relationships

Although Black individuals face some shared stressors and experiences, they are not a monolithic group, and thus support processes and relationship outcomes may differ between subgroups. One important source of difference may be the race of one's partner: Although Black people's relationship satisfaction may not significantly differ by the race of their partner (Brooks, 2021), Black individuals may face different challenges and rely on different coping strategies in interracial versus intraracial relationships (Clark et al., 2015). For instance, individuals in interracial relationships may have to contend with unique stressors such as societal discrimination and bias (e.g., Flores, 2020; Skinner & Hudac, 2017), disapproval from family

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and friends (e.g., Greif & Saviet, 2020; Castle Bell & Hastings, 2015), and intimate racism from their partner (e.g., Yampolsky et al., 2022; Leslie & Young, 2015). For both Black individuals in interracial and intraracial relationships, supportive partner behaviors can buffer relationship quality in the face of stressors such as discrimination (Rosenthal & Starks, 2015; Baptist et al., 2019; McNeil et al., 2014). However, it is not yet clear whether and which processes may be more or less important for people in interracial versus intraracial relationships.

The Current Study

To address this gap in the literature, we examined how perceived partner responsiveness (PPR: Reis, 2012) and dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 1997), two common measures of partner support, were associated with relationship quality for people in interracial versus intraracial relationships. Additionally, members of Black interracial and/or intraracial relationships may use other, understudied strategies besides PPR and dyadic coping. Therefore, we also asked participants an open-ended question about the role of race in their relationship. Romantic relationships research has generally focused on quantitative approaches to identify universal determinants of relationship success, but has neglected how specific, marginalized groups experience and navigate romantic relationships. Extant literature has also been largely limited by taking either a fully qualitative or quantitative approach. Therefore, this study takes a convergent mixed-method approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data to understand differences in the prevalence and effectiveness of support behaviors depending on the racial composition of the relationship. A convergent design also allows us to triangulate findings from the qualitative and quantitative strands to identify and study areas of convergence and divergence.

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With respect to our quantitative findings, we hypothesized that (1) both PPR and dyadic coping would be positively related to romantic relationship satisfaction in Black and interracial couples. We also expected that (2) these effects would be stronger for Black compared to non-Black individuals. Additionally, as the literature comparing support processes between interracial and intraracial couples is sparse, as an exploratory research question, we examined whether the association between these coping processes and romantic relationship quality differ based on the racial composition of the relationship. With respect to our qualitative findings, we used participants' open-ended responses to better assess their own understanding of the influence of their and their partner's racial identity and identify additional support processes that may not have been captured by our quantitative measures.

Method

Participants

We collected two samples to address these questions. First, in March and April 2021, we surveyed 114 adults in the United States who were in romantic relationships in which at least one partner identified as Black. Only one member of each couple completed the survey; these included 57 Black respondents in intraracial relationships (i.e., with another Black partner), 20 Black respondents in interracial relationships (i.e., with a non-Black partner), and 37 non-Black respondents in interracial relationships (i.e., with a Black partner). Among non-Black respondents, 20 were White, 8 were Asian, 3 were Hispanic/Latinx, and 6 were multi-racial. The 57 interracial relationships included 27 relationships in which a non-Black woman was with a Black man and 23 relationships in which a non-Black man was with a Black woman.[1]

[1] One participant was a Black woman in a relationship with a non-Black woman, three were non-Black men in a relationship with a Black man, two participants were Black men in a relationship with a non-Black man, and one participant was a non-Black woman in a relationship with a Black woman.

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The second sample included 55 couples and was collected between November 2021 and April 2022, including 50 Black respondents in intraracial relationships, 30 Black respondents in interracial relationships, and 30 non-Black respondents in interracial relationships. Both members of the couple completed the background survey. Among non-Black respondents, 25 were White, 1 was Hispanic/Latinx, and 4 were multi-racial. The 30 interracial relationships included 14 relationships in which a non-Black woman was with a Black man and 13 relationships in which a non-Black man was with a Black woman.[2]

As shown in Table 1, the combined samples consisted of 51% women, 47% men, and 1% genderqueer/gender non-conforming participants; 90% different-gender relationships and 7% same-gender relationships;[3] and participants ranged in age from 19 to 65 (median = 28 years). Participants were in romantic relationships that ranged from 1 month to 38 years (median = 3.3 years) and 35% were married. Income was measured on a scale from 1 ("Under $15,000") to 10 ("Above $300,000"). Participants' responses ranged from 1 to 9, with a mean of 3.13 (which falls between $25,001 to $35,000 and $35,000 to $50,000).[4]

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Procedure

All study procedures for both samples were approved by the Institutional Review Board. For the first sample, participants were recruited through posts on social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter), the psychology subject pool at a large public university,

[2] One couple was a non-Black man with a Black genderqueer/gender-nonconforming partner, one couple was a Black man with a non-Black genderqueer/gender-nonconforming partner, and one couple was a Black woman with a non-Black woman.

[3] In the first sample, one participant was a woman in a relationship with a genderqueer/gender-non-conforming partner, and one participant was a woman who did not report her partner's gender. In the second sample, there were three couples that included a man and a genderqueer/gender-non-conforming partner. Results remained consistent when excluding same-gender couples and couples including genderqueer/gender-non-conforming individuals.

[4] Demographics are also reported separately by sample in supplemental tables S1, S2, and S3.

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and Prolific.com.[5] For the second sample, participants were recruited through a volunteer database at a large public academic medical center.

Participants for both samples were eligible if they were in a romantic relationship in which they and/or their partner identified as Black. Additionally, all participants had to be at least 18 years old and reside in the United States. After providing informed consent, participants who met these eligibility requirements then completed a series of questionnaires about their relationship described in more detail below. In the first sample, students from the university were given course credit and participants from Prolific were compensated $9.50 per hour for their participation in the forty-five-minute study; participants recruited from social media were not compensated. In the second sample, participants were paid up for $40 for completion of a longer daily diary study including the background survey analyzed here.

For the first sample, 150 individuals initially completed the study. We embedded an attention check into one of our survey items and excluded participants who both failed this attention check and completed less than seventy percent of the survey or who provided nonsensical answers to the open-ended question ($N = 36$), leaving us with usable data for 114 participants. For the second sample, 117 individuals completed the initial survey. We excluded three participants whose partners did not participate and four participants who did not meet the eligibility requirements (e.g., neither member of the couple self-identified as Black). Data and materials are available at https://osf.io/9pfkw/.

Measures

Romantic Relationship Quality

[5] Likelihood ratio tests comparing the full mixed effects models including source (i.e., participants recruited by social media, the intro psych pool, and Prolific in the first sample as well as those in the second sample) to reduced models without source revealed no significant differences for key variables. Therefore, we collapse across these sources for subsequent analyses. Full statistics are reported in supplemental table S4.

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For the first sample, participants reported on the quality of their romantic relationships using the six-item Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). For the first five questions, participants responded on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). For the last item, "All things considered, what degree of happiness best describes your relationship?" participants responded on a scale from 0 (*completely unhappy*) to 10 (*completely happy*). These items were then averaged into a final measure which could range from 0.83 to 5.83. In this sample, scores ranged over the full sample, and the measure had a reliability of $\alpha = .90$.

For the second sample, participants used the four-item Couple Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007). The first question, "Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship" on a scale from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 6 (perfect). For the next three questions, participants responded on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 5 (completely). These items were then averaged into a final measure which could range from 0 to 5.25. In this sample, scores ranged from 1.19 to 5.25, and the measure had a reliability of $\alpha = .94$. When conducting analyses across the two samples, these two measures were standardized and averaged to form a composite of relationship quality.

Perceived Partner Responsiveness

Participants completed the eighteen-item Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (Reis et al., 2017), reporting on the responsiveness of their partner on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) in the first sample and 1 (*not at all*) to 8 (*completely true*) in the second sample. An example item is, "My partner usually is responsive to my needs." The scale from the second sample was converted to a five-point scale, and then the items were averaged into a final measure which could range from 1 to 5. The measure ranged from 1.53 to 5 and had a reliability of $\alpha = .95$ in the first sample and $\alpha = .96$ in the second sample.

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Dyadic Coping

Participants also completed a modified version of the thirty-seven-item Dyadic Coping Inventory (Bodenmann, 2008), reporting how they perceived their partner supporting them in coping with stress. For the first sample, to limit participant fatigue, we included two or three items with the highest factor loadings and item-scale correlations (following a similar procedure from Wardecker et al., 2017) for each of the three subscales from the inventory from previous validation studies (Ledermann, et al., 2010): supportive responses to the participant's stress (e.g., "My partner listens to me and gives me the opportunity to communicate what really bothers me"), unsupportive responses to the participant's stress (e.g., "My partner blames me for not coping well enough with stress"), and general management of stress together (e.g., "I am satisfied with the support I receive from my partner and the way we deal with stress together"). Each of these questions was answered on a scale from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree"). The items were averaged for each subscale; in this sample, scores ranged from the full 1 to 5 scale for supportive responses and general management of stress and ranged from 1 to 4.67 for unsupportive responses, with reliabilities of $\alpha = .73$, $\alpha = .85$, and $\alpha = .93$ respectively.

In the second sample, participants completed the full version of the Dyadic Coping Inventory (Bodenmann, 2008). In this sample, the subscales of focus had reliabilities of $\alpha = .86$, $\alpha = .82$, and $\alpha = .94$ respectively. The correlations between the composites made up of the reduced items from the first sample and the full subscale were $r = .94$ for supportive responses and $r = .98$ for unsupportive responses. In the second sample alone, these correlations were $r = .89$ for supportive responses and $r = .95$ for unsupportive responses. In the analyses for this paper, we use all available items for each sample.[6]

[6] The full items for the evaluation of the general management of stress together subscale were included in both samples.

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Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

We first conducted multi-level regression analyses accounting for the nested nature of the data from the dyadic sample to assess associations between variables. Next, to determine whether an individual's or their romantic partner's race moderated associations between support processes and relationship quality, we conducted a series of multi-level moderated regression analyses. Relationship quality was predicted from relationship type and mean-centered variables for each of the support processes (i.e., PPR, supportive partner responses to stress, unsupportive partner responses to stress, and overall dyadic coping). To account for our three-level relationship racial composition variable, we created two orthogonal contrast codes: The first compared Black respondents in an interracial relationship (coded as 1) to Black respondents in a same-race relationship (coded as -1, with non-Black participants in an interracial relationship coded as 0), and the second compared Black participants (both those in interracial and same-race relationships coded as 1) to non-Black participants (coded as -2). We created separate interaction terms between each of the contrast codes and each support process and included both in a separate regression model for each support process (i.e., four models in total) predicting relationship quality. Sensitivity analyses indicated that a sample of 224 participants gives us 80% power to detect an effect of $f^2 = 0.04$ for the interaction effects in these analyses. Accounting for non-independence of our key variables in the dyadic sample, we have an effective sample size ranging from 140 to 151. An effective sample size of 140 gives us 80% power to detect an effect of $f^2 = 0.06$. Although this means we do not have power to detect very small effects, we maintain that effects smaller than $f^2 = 0.06$ may not be particularly meaningful in this context.

Qualitative Data Analysis

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In the first sample, we additionally solicited responses to the open-ended prompt, "What role does race play in your relationship?" to understand different kinds of spontaneously described support behaviors. The first author, a biracial Asian and White doctoral student, and a Black female undergraduate research assistant identified a subset of participants' responses to analyze after reading the responses and selecting all that mentioned support behaviors or barriers to support. Support behaviors were defined as interpersonal behaviors or experiences that individuals used to cope with their own and/or their partner's stress, and barriers to support were defined as anything the participants explicitly identified as hindering their ability to cope with their own and/or their partner's stress. If both coders agreed a response mentioned support behaviors or barriers to support, it was included. We identified forty-seven responses that met this requirement; other responses did not mention support. This subset of responses was then analyzed by the first author and research assistant using an inductive constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017): First, the text was broken down into chunks of meaningful units that mentioned support behaviors, which were then grouped with similar text from other participants' responses. Then, the two coders worked together to continue to refine and regroup these categories until they were finalized. Once the categories were finalized, the coders interpreted these categories and assigned labels. Lastly, these categories were then checked by the second author, a biracial Black and Taiwanese doctoral student; there were no disagreements in these codes.

Results

Quantitative Results

Preliminary Analyses

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First, we examined whether mean levels of relationship quality or any of the support behaviors differed by the racial composition of the couple (i.e., Black participants in intraracial relationships, Black participants in interracial relationships, and non-Black participants in interracial relationships; see Table 2). We conducted a series of likelihood ratio tests comparing the full mixed effects model including racial composition to a reduced model without racial composition, which revealed there were no significant differences in relationship quality, $\chi^2(2) = 4.07$, $p = .131$, PPR, $\chi^2(2) = 4.13$, $p = .127$, supportive partner responses, $\chi^2(2) = 1.66$, $p = .437$, negative partner responses, $\chi^2(2) = 3.14$, $p = .208$, or overall dyadic coping, $\chi^2(2) = 2.45$, $p = .293$ by racial composition of the relationship. We also examined whether potential covariates such as age, relationship length, income, gender, and relationship status differed by racial composition. As only relationship status significantly differed by racial group (see Table 1), we included this as a covariate in our subsequent analyses.

[INSERT TABLE 2]

Next, we examined associations between support behaviors and relationship quality. PPR, supportive partner responses to stress, and overall dyadic coping were significantly positively related to relationship quality, whereas unsupportive partner responses to stress were significantly negatively related to relationship quality (see Table 3). Neither actor nor partner race were significantly related to any support variables or to relationship quality. We also examined whether relationship length or gender were significantly associated with any support processes or with relationship quality. As shown in Table 3, women reported lower perceived partner responsiveness ($M = 71.61$, $SD = 15.23$) and overall dyadic coping ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.14$) than men did ($M = 74.85$, $SD = 10.84$, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.97$, respectively). No other associations were significant.

[INSERT TABLE 3]

Do Associations Between Support Processes and Relationship Quality Differ Based on Race?

[INSERT TABLE 4]

As shown in Table 4, results from the moderated regressions revealed significant associations between relationship quality and all four support processes when controlling for the interactions with race, supporting our first hypothesis. However, there were no significant interaction effects between the race contrasts and each of the support processes, failing to support our second hypothesis, indicating that the effect of these support processes on relationship quality did not significantly differ based on the racial composition of the relationship. These results were consistent when correcting for multiple comparisons using a Bonferroni correction.[7] The dyadic sample allows us to test for partner effects as well; however, none of these effects were significant.[8]

Qualitative Results

We also examined the types of support that participants spontaneously reported using in their open-ended responses and identified eight common themes (shown in Table 5): Six described forms of support and two described barriers to providing support.

Positive Forms of Support

Mutual Understanding. The most common theme, as shown in Table 5, was mutual understanding. Participants whose responses were categorized into this theme described an implicit shared understanding with their partner and alignment in their views of the world. Often, participants described this understanding as resulting from shared background or experiences, and 54.2% of the responses from individuals in intraracial relationships included this theme. For

[7] Results are reported separately by sample in supplemental tables S5 and S6.
[8] See supplemental table S7.

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example, a Black man in a relationship with a Black woman stated, "Being from the same racial background and ethnic background means we understand each other better. Certain things she just gets without needing a big explanation."[9] This participant identified their common racial background as the source of their sense of understanding and emphasized how explicit, verbal explanations were unnecessary to facilitate this understanding; this was a common pattern throughout responses reflecting this theme.

Although the theme of mutual understanding was less common in responses from participants in interracial relationships, a few participants in interracial relationships with a non-Black person of color described solidarity across minority groups as a source of mutual understanding. For example, a Black female participant described her relationship with an Asian man by saying, "In America today, and throughout history, we have both seen racist attacks on people of our race. That commonality I think bonds us more than past relationships with white men." Like the responses from those in intraracial relationships, this participant draws attention to her shared minority status with her partner and details the ways that their shared identity leads to understanding. In addition, this response suggests that individuals may draw on other shared identities (e.g., identifying as a person of color, sharing a minority sexual or gender orientation) to facilitate mutual understanding even when partners do not share a racial identity.

Mutual understanding occurred less frequently in responses from White participants or Black participants in interracial relationships with a White partner. One White man in a relationship with a Black woman stated that he was "definitely aware of everything she feels and associates with her race" but did not describe any particular mechanism through which this understanding had been established.

[9] Quotes from participants are edited to correct misspellings but are otherwise unaltered.

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Open Conversations About Race. The second most common theme was open conversations about race, in which participants described explicit conversations they had with their partner about race, culture, and discrimination. This theme was more frequently mentioned by participants in interracial relationships, with 33.3% of Black individuals and 45.5% of non-Black individuals in interracial relationships including this theme, compared to 16.7% of individuals in intraracial relations. For example, an Asian woman in a relationship with a Black man stated, “The past year, especially, has involved a lot of deep talks about racial issues and our different racial identities. I think that this has actually made us closer and more understanding of each other's culture and background.” Here, she described explicit conversations that facilitated closeness and understanding, which contrasts with the nonverbal understanding described in the first theme.

When participants in intraracial relationships described having conversations with their partner, they tended to focus on coping with negative experiences rather than attempting to establish understanding. For example, one Black woman in a relationship with a Black man shared, “Given the historical context of race in the U.S., race shapes our day-to-day interactions and experiences. Race often comes up as a topic of discussion for us and we are constantly aware of the role it plays in shaping our overall livelihood.” This participant implies that these conversations stem from frequent encounters with racism and center on coping and support rather than facilitating understanding, which was commonly expressed among individuals in intraracial relationships.

Willingness to Learn. The third most common theme was willingness to learn, in which participants described an openness and effort to understand and support their partner. This theme came up more often in interracial relationships, although it was present in all relationship

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categories. One Black woman described her White female partner by saying, “I like being with her because she really puts in the work to unpack her biases and she really works towards antiracism. She sometimes says things that show her whiteness (so to speak) but is so so so good about it when I mention why it's problematic. She's so good at listening, learning, and changing her behaviors.” This participant described the effortful process her partner engages in towards antiracism and specifically notes this as a reason she enjoys their relationship. Although she notes that her partner sometimes says problematic things, her partner is open to listening and learning to be a better partner and ally.

Non-Black participants described similar interactions, such as one White woman who described sending her Black male partner “a text after a news item thinking I should express some sympathy/support but he was offended by this and explained it to me by sending me an article about it. I felt terrible about this but glad he was honest with me. Before I was more confident that I already understood how to avoid making mistakes related to race but this reminded me that I really have to keep listening and learning if I want to be a good partner.” This interaction caused a mindset shift for the participant, as she recognized that a willingness to listen and learn is crucial for her to be able to support her partner well. The one member of an intraracial relationship whose response included this theme noted the ways she and her partner had “grown so we love each other well” broadly rather than specifically mentioning race as an area of growth and learning.

Defending One’s Partner. One of the least common themes was defending one’s partner, in which a participant described one member of the relationship attempting to step in when their partner faced discrimination. This theme was only seen among participants in interracial relationships and exclusively detailed situations where a non-Black individual

attempted to defend their Black partner. For example, a Black man in a relationship with a White woman described "an incident with police officers in a supposed racial abuse. My partner being White/European stepped up and was really eager to get justice more than I would seek myself." Notably, the participant describes a discrepancy between their own and their partner's desire for confrontation. Other responses of participants in interracial relationships described similar instances.

Resilience. The other least common theme was resilience, in which participants described ways that they and their partner bonded and showed strength together in the face of discrimination. Notably, only Black participants mentioned this theme. For example, a Black woman in a relationship with a Black man stated, "We find strength in our race but we are aware of the racial injustice we may face and it makes us work very hard to keep attaining the best we can." This participant juxtaposes the injustice that she and her partner face with their determination and work ethic; she goes as far as implying these injustices catalyze their drive and ambition. Another Black woman in a relationship with a Black man described similar reactions in the face of discrimination, stating how "Bad or negative reactions make us stronger." Throughout these responses were themes of unifying with one's partner and resisting the negative effects of discrimination by demonstrating relational, emotional, or occupational strength and success.

The one member of an interracial relationship whose response included this theme described the resilience he and his partner had shown in the face of shared discrimination for being in an interracial relationship. Notably, this Black man in a relationship with an Asian woman stated that "Many people, specifically Asian males, sometimes visibly show their shock and astonishment when they see us together. This sometimes makes me uncomfortable and it

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reminds the both of us that some people may be against our relationship." Despite these negative experiences, he notes that their awareness of injustice and discrimination they share as people of color in an interracial relationship actually "brings us closer together."

Joy. The last and least common positive theme was joy, in which participants spontaneously celebrated positive aspects of their relationship outside of the context of discrimination. The only two participants whose responses included this theme were Black participants in intraracial relationships. One Black woman detailed her relationship with her Black male partner and the way that "Every moment can be turned into a song or a beat because we are very expressive as people. We laugh loud and we laugh hard." The positivity and vibrancy of their relationship, demonstrated through song and laughter, is described as a unique source of strength and support.

Barriers to Support

Lack of Awareness. Participants also mentioned two barriers to providing support. The most common theme was a lack of awareness: one partner lacking understanding or failing to recognize the struggles of their partner. This theme was present across participants in all racial categories, although it was more common among those in interracial relationships. One Black man in a relationship with a White man described a memory from election night: "…we had dinner with friends, and I was only Black man there, and after a while, I shut down. And everyone was so confused why or they just did not notice- they remained lively the whole evening because they did not have the same worries as I did." This participant notes that their partner and friends failed to either recognize his discomfort or to understand its cause, notably race-specific worries about the election results.

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Non-Black participants also noted this lack of awareness on their own part. For example, a White man in a relationship with a Black man stated, “I think there are definitely times where I feel stuck like I can't say anything because I don't know the black experience. Like he'll sometimes say things and I will have no words because I don't know what to say.” Notably, this participant tied this lack of understanding to an inability to verbally comfort or advise his partner; thus, this lack of awareness directly inhibits his ability to provide support to his partner.

The one member of an intraracial relationship who mentioned this theme similarly noted differences in understanding resulting from race, noting that even though she and her mixed-race partner are both Black, his additional White racial background contributes to a lack of awareness. She, a mixed Black and Native American woman, states, “I am not sure of how comfortable I am about marrying a man that is mixed with mostly white. I know I might not have even given him a chance if he wasn't black at least a little because I don't think he could understand me and my struggles as much.” Notably, she equates his racial background with amount of understanding, suggesting a man that is half-Black would have more understanding than a man who is not Black at all but less than a man who was fully Black.

Different Ways of Thinking. The last theme identified was differences in ways of thinking, in which participants described disagreement with their partner’s beliefs or interpretations of events. This theme was only present in the responses of Black participants. For example, one Black woman in a relationship with an Asian man stated, “We have disagreements on meanings and intentions of words very often. He will say things that seem innocuous to him, but are microaggressions to me.” Here, she describes different ways of viewing her partner’s statements; to her, they are problematic microaggressions, while he fails to see anything wrong with them.

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Some Black participants in intraracial relationships noted these same issues. A Black woman described her Black male partner as having "a 'Black Mentality' in our day-to-day life which has had a lot of negative effects in our relationship." She states that she thinks "very differently compared to my partner and it's hard to approach my partner differently to change their thought process." Interestingly, despite sharing some aspects of a Black racial identity with her partner, this participant distances herself from the viewpoints she associates with that identity and names this as a point of disagreement. Specifically, she notes that their different ways of thinking can cause difficulty communicating. This tension could also inhibit the support that these partners might provide to one another.

Quantification of Qualitative Themes

After identifying the major themes, we coded whether each was present or absent in each of the 47 responses. We then examined the frequency of each theme, as shown in Table 5, and ran a series of chi-square tests examining differences by the racial composition of the couple in the frequency of each theme. The only significant difference was in the theme of defending one's partner: non-Black participants in interracial relationships (n = 3) were more likely to be coded as using this theme than Black participants in intraracial relationships (n = 0), X^2 (2, 47) = 6.52, p = .04. These findings should be interpreted in the context of the relatively small number of participants whose responses included this theme.

[INSERT TABLE 5]

Next, we examined whether each theme was related to our quantitative measure of relationship quality by conducting a series of correlations, as shown in Table 6. We found that participants whose responses were coded as reflecting the different ways of thinking theme reported significantly lower relationship quality. Presence versus absence of the other themes

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was not significantly related to relationship quality. However, the different ways of thinking theme was significantly related to lower PPR, supportive partner responses to stress, and overall dyadic coping, and higher unsupportive partner responses to stress; the theme of mutual understanding was significantly related to higher supportive partner responses and overall dyadic coping.

[INSERT TABLE 6]

Discussion

The current study took a mixed-methods approach to understand links between support behaviors and relationship quality in interracial and intraracial couples in which one or more partners identify as Black. Partner support is an important component of both individual and relational well-being, particularly in the face of stress, and support strategies, such as PPR and dyadic coping, are generally helpful for romantic relationships. However, less is known about the support strategies used by people in Black intraracial and interracial couples, although individuals in these relationships may be more likely to face stress due to couple-level and individual-level stigma. Like other studies (Reis, 2012; Bodenmann et al., 2006) we found that people who reported that their partner was more responsive and responded to their stress in more supportive and less unsupportive ways also reported higher relationship quality. Additionally, the importance of these support behaviors for relationship quality was consistent across relationship types and did not differ by the racial composition of the relationship.

The qualitative data also revealed the importance of interpersonal processes for relationship quality for individuals in both interracial and intraracial relationships. However, while the quantitative analyses show support is equally important across types of relationships, the qualitative analyses provided a more nuanced picture of the types of support that may be

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most important. We identified specific forms of supportive and unsupportive behaviors from participants' responses, namely: mutual understanding, open conversations, willingness to learn, defending one's partner, resilience, joy, lack of awareness, and different ways of thinking. These themes are consistent with prior qualitative work, with commonality, understanding, lack of awareness, and different ways of thinking emerging as themes in both interracial and Black couples' discourse about their relationship (Brooks et al., 2021; Brummett, 2017; Chaney, 2010). Similarly, the importance of open conversations in interracial relationships has been identified in both qualitative and quantitative research (Baptist et al., 2019; Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2011). We also examined trends in the frequency of each of these themes and found that individuals in intraracial relationships more often lean on a sense of unity and shared strength, whereas individuals in interracial relationships were more likely to describe the non-stigmatized member of the relationship as defending their partner.

Together, these findings suggest that supportive and unsupportive partner behaviors are closely linked with relationship quality, but that the specific manifestation of support may differ depending on the racial composition of the relationship. Because supportive relationships are one of the strongest predictors of well-being, this is a key area for research and intervention. Based on our findings, clinicians working with Black individuals or couples might emphasize different support behaviors depending on the racial composition of the couple. For example, clinicians working with same-race couples might focus on strategies couples can use to cultivate a sense of unity and shared strength.

Constraints on Generality

We initially hypothesized that support processes may be particularly beneficial for Black individuals in romantic relationships, presumably due in part to stigma or discrimination.

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However, it is important to note that we did not measure experiences of discrimination in this study. Further research is needed to understand how partners support each other in the face of racism-based stress specifically. Additionally, due to the cross-sectional nature of this study, we cannot speak to whether (for instance) more supportive strategies are causally related to more satisfying relationships. People in more satisfying relationships may be more likely to use adaptive support processes, which may further contribute to relationship satisfaction.

While the diversity of our sample is a strength of this paper, our relatively small sample size did not allow us to examine how results differed by gender (e.g., differences between Black male/White female couples and Black female/White male couples, differences between same-gender and different-gender couples), age, relationship length, or the non-Black partner's race or ethnicity (e.g., differences between Black-White and Black-Asian interracial couples). Given the importance of examining these processes through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1990; Totenhagen et al., 2023), considering the heterogeneity of these groups in future research is paramount.

We also modified a few of the measures included in the first sample from their original form; these modifications included using only a subset of the items in the original Dyadic Coping Inventory (Bodenmann, 2008). Although this approach raises questions about the validity of this measure, high correlations with the full subscales in the second sample suggest the reduced items should adequately assess dyadic coping. Additionally, we used different measures of romantic relationship quality in the two samples. Even though these two measures have been shown to be highly correlated in previous research (Funk & Rogge, 2007; Maroufizadeh et al., 2019), this nonetheless weakens the internal validity of our study. Although these methodological weaknesses are potential issues, this study nonetheless takes a rigorous

approach (such as by testing for group differences and controlling for important individual differences as covariates) to test novel questions and provides valuable insight into the relationship dynamics in an understudied population.

Conclusion

This study found that relationship quality was positively correlated with high partner responsiveness and supportive responses to stress across relationships. Interestingly, the efficacy of these support behaviors did not significantly vary with the racial makeup of the relationship. Qualitative responses, however, provided insights into unique supportive processes and challenges linked to race. This work highlights the importance of taking a mixed-methods approach when studying support behaviors for people in diverse relationships. We hope that these insights inspire future research to take a dyadic, experimental approach when studying support behaviors in diverse relationships.

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