PATTERNS OF INFORMAL SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND CHURCH MEMBERS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

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This article investigates sociodemographic and family and church factors as correlates of support from family and church members among a representative sample of African Americans. Overall patterns of family and church support indicate that slightly more than half of respondents receive assistance from both family and church networks, one quarter receive assistance from family only, and roughly equal percentages (9%) receive help from either church members only or do not receive help from either group. Multinomial logistic regression analysis was used to examine sociodemographic (i.e., age, marital status, gender, region, education, income, and urbanicity) and family and church factors (i.e., family closeness, family contact, parental status, and church participation) as predictors of specific patterns and sources of support. The findings indicated significant age, gender, and marital and parental status differences in patterns of support from family and church. Perceptions of family closeness, degree of interaction with family, and overall levels of participation in church activities were associated with distinctive patterns of assistance.

A long tradition of research and scholarship in the social and behavioral sciences and African American studies documents that

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extended families and churches are two of the most influential and established institutions within Black communities (Berry & Blasingame, 1982; Billingsley, 1992, 1999; Hill, 1999; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McAdoo, 1981; Staples & Johnson, 1993). Historically, families and churches promoted and sustained Black community life, both during and following the period of slavery. The influences of family and church involvement extended throughout the 20th century and were significant factors in many of the pivotal events that characterize African American life during that period (e.g., Black migration to the North and Midwest, the Civil Rights Movement). Currently, both families and churches perform a number of important functions that help to address several problematic issues facing Black families and communities. Family and church networks provide informal social support to address a variety of issues, including chronic poverty (Stack, 1974), coping with the loss of a loved one (Neighbors, Musick, & Williams, 1998), providing assistance to those who are ill and disabled (Dilworth-Anderson, 1994; Dilworth-Anderson, Williams, & Cooper, 1999), the care and supervision of grandchildren (Burton, 1992; Burton, Dilworth-Anderson, & Merriwether-de Vries, 1995; Kivett, 1993; Minkler & Roe, 1993; Strom & Strom, 1993), and specifically, caring for the children of adolescent parents (Miller, 1994; Unger & Cooley, 1992).

Despite the obvious importance of both family and church as sources of social support for African Americans, very little research investigates the nature and functions of these informal networks. Although an emerging body of work has begun to systematically explore the form and functioning of informal support networks within Black families (Burton, 1996; Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991), surprisingly little research explores the patterns and correlates of informal support from church networks (i.e., church members). Furthermore, we know very little about whether and under what circumstances these two important sources of informal assistance operate together.

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FAMILY AND CHURCH SUPPORT

Lincoln and Mamiya’s (1990) landmark volume on the Black church provides an important historical perspective on the relationship between Black families and churches. They argue that the Black church has had a pivotal role as the sole communal institution in many urban and rural Black communities. Given this position, Black churches are closely involved in the complex network of Black family life and, in particular, extended family and multigenerational family relationships. Families are the building blocks for Black churches and through their teaching, belief systems, and rituals, Black churches and families maintain a symbiotic relationship with one another (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 311). The frequent use of kinship terms to refer to fellow congregants (e.g., brother, sister) and the honorific titles given to esteemed church elders (i.e., church mother) are further examples of the quasi-family qualities that characterize Black religious institutions. Particular church congregations may be closely associated with one or more extended families who are long-standing members of the congregation. In these circumstances, the concept of a church family or church kin may be a particularly meaningful way to symbolize the special “family-like” quality of these relationships (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 311) in which the rights and responsibilities of kinship are conferred to fellow church members.

Despite the prominence of family and church as sources of assistance, only a few quantitative studies have investigated families and church members as complementary sources of aid. Taylor and Chatters (1986b) examined reports of support from three sources—family, church members, and friends, among a representative sample of older Black adults. The most prominent pattern that emerged involved receiving support from both family and church members. However, respondents also indicated that they received support from either family or church members, whereas some older persons indicated that neither group provided assistance. Only a small minority of elderly Blacks could be described as “socially isolated” (did not receive assistance from family or church members nor did they have a best or close friend). Importantly, the findings indicated
that elderly Blacks who received assistance from church members were also likely to have family and friends in their support network.

The study’s findings further indicated that family, friends, and church members provided different types of support. Family members were more likely to provide either total support (i.e., would do anything, everything for me) or instrumental assistance (i.e., goods and services, financial assistance, and transportation). Friends, on the other hand, were more likely to provide companionship, whereas church members provided assistance in the form of advice and encouragement, help during sickness, and prayer. It may be the case that church members’ affective support during illness (i.e., visiting, companionship, moral support) is relatively short-term in nature, but nonetheless helpful in easing the burden of the more extensive care (i.e., instrumental support) provided by family members.

Walls and Zarit’s (1991) study of enacted support from church and family among a small sample of older Black adults found that both family and church support were predictive of perceptions of well-being. Finally, Taylor, Chatters, and Jackson (1997) investigated changes in network involvement among African Americans using Wave I and later waves of the National Survey of Black Americans. At baseline, they found that only a small number of respondents reported low levels of involvement with family and friends. Although subsequent waves of the panel indicated that involvement in church support networks was not as extensive, fully half of the respondents reported consistent use of these networks over time. Collectively, the findings from these studies suggest that for many African Americans, family and church members are important and complementary sources of informal social support.

The family surrogate model (Glock, Ringer, & Babbie, 1967) may be a useful framework for understanding the operation of family and church support networks. The family surrogate model (which was originally developed to explain demographic differences in levels of religious participation) suggests that for some individuals (unmarried persons and those without children), involvement in religious organizations serves as a surrogate for family relationships. The family surrogate model’s sole emphasis on
demographic factors proved to be inadequate for explaining variations in religious involvement. However, an adaptation of the family surrogate model may be a useful framework for examining how family and church support networks are used in the context of particular demographic and family and church factors. Specifically, we are interested in whether support from family and church networks is related both to particular sociodemographic variables (e.g., marital and parental statuses) and to factors that characterize the nature of relationships with family and church networks (e.g., participation, interaction, and investment).

FOCUS OF PRESENT ANALYSIS

The current literature poses a number of important questions regarding the correlates and patterns of reported assistance from family and church members. The present analysis attempts to address these issues by investigating (a) the demographic, family, and church participation factors that predict family and church support configurations and (b) specific patterns of assistance from family and church members (e.g., family only, church only, family and church).

METHOD

SAMPLE

The analyses were conducted using the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) data set. These data were collected by the Program for Research on Black Americans, Institute for Social Research (University of Michigan), and consist of 2,107 completed interviews collected in 1979 and 1980 (with a response rate of close to 70%). A more detailed description of the NSBA sample is provided by Jackson (1991), and a demographic description of the NSBA sample and comparison with Census Bureau data is provided by Taylor (1986).
One of the limitations of the current analysis is that the National Survey of Black Americans is more than 20 years old. The NSBA, however, remains the best source of data for examining this issue. Most large national probability surveys that include a significant number of Black American respondents may, at best, have a few indicators of religious involvement but do not have any measures of informal assistance from church members (e.g., American Changing Lives, Health and Retirement Survey, National Co-morbidity Survey, National Survey of Families and Households, Panel Study of Income Dynamics). The 1998 General Social Survey is the only major national study that has several indicators of church support, but it does not include corresponding measures of family support and, more important, has fewer than 200 Black respondents. Additionally, using the later waves of the National Survey of Black Americans data was not optimal because of fairly high rates of sample attrition. This type of attrition is fairly typical in samples that have higher percentages of respondents who are poor, minority, and apartment dwelling (see Musick, Campbell, & Ellison, 2001; Wolford & Torres, 2001).

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

The dependent variables were respondent self-reports of assistance from family members and church members. Support from family was measured by the question, “How often do people in your family—including children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, in-laws and so on—help you out? Would you say very often, fairly often, not too often, or never?” Support from church members was measured by the question “How often do people in your church or place of worship help you out? Would you say often, sometimes, hardly ever, or never?”

Previous research using these variables indicated that a portion of respondents, when asked how often they receive assistance from their church members and family members, volunteer that they have never needed assistance from these groups. A total of 18% (17.9%) of respondents volunteered that they never needed help
from church members (Taylor & Chatters, 1988), whereas 9.7% volunteered that they never needed help from family members (Taylor, 1990). Previous analyses indicate that persons who volunteer that they have never needed assistance are conceptually and empirically distinct from respondents who either receive assistance or who indicate that they do not receive help from family and church members (Chatters & Taylor, 1988; Taylor, 1990). Consequently, persons who volunteered that they never needed help were excluded from the present analysis.

This analysis focuses on whether respondents receive help from family and church members. The two measures—support from family members and support from church members—were recoded as a single variable with four categories assessing whether respondents (a) receive support from both family and church members, (b) receive support from family members only, (c) receive support from church members only, or (d) do not receive support from either family or church members.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The independent variables in this analysis include a set of demographic factors (i.e., age, gender, marital status, region, urbanicity, education, income), frequency of family contact, subjective family closeness, and frequency of involvement in organized religious activities. Frequency of family contact is measured by the question, “How often do you see, write or talk on the telephone with family or relatives who do not live with you? Would you say nearly every day, at least once a week, a few times a month, at least once a month, a few times a year, or hardly ever?” Subjective family closeness is assessed by the question, “Would you say your family members are very close in their feelings to each other, fairly close, not too close, or not close at all?”

Church participation examines the extent to which respondents are involved in activities within their church (e.g., choir, men’s and women’s clubs). Respondents who participate in activities (not including religious services) at their place of worship nearly every day receive a 7, the highest score on this variable. This was followed
by persons who report participating in activities at least once a week (a score of 6), a few times a month (a score of 5), and a few times of year (a score of 4). Persons who are church members but who never participate in other types of church activities received a score of 3, and respondents who attend religious services less than once a year received a score of 2. Finally, persons who have not attended religious services (excluding weddings and funerals) since the age of 18 received a score of 1.

ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Multinomial logistic regression (Agresti, 1990) was used to analyze the data. Multinomial logistic regression is appropriate for the four-level polytomous response outcome variable used in this study (i.e., patterns of support from church and family members) and can accommodate both continuous and categorical independent variables. The Categorical Data Modeling procedure in SAS was used to perform the analysis.

RESULTS

Slightly more than half (55.3%) of the sample indicate receiving informal support from both family and church members (see Figure 1). A total of 27% (26.9%) indicate that they receive help from family only, and 8.2% report receiving help from church members only. Finally, a minority of respondents (9.6%) report that they do not receive assistance from either family or church members. Table 1 presents the results of the multinomial logistic regression analysis. The format and interpretation of this analysis is similar to dummy variable regression and consists of contrasts between a comparison and an excluded category. However, in multinomial logistic regression, comparisons between selected categories and the excluded category involve the dependent variable (as opposed to the independent variable in standard dummy variable regression). The four-category dependent variable yields six unique comparisons of support: (a) both family and church versus family only,
(b) both family and church versus church only, (c) both family and church versus neither, (d) church only versus family only, (e) family only versus neither, and (f) church only versus neither. However, given our particular theoretical interest in patterns of support from family and church members, only four of the comparisons will be presented. Specifically, the results focus on contrasts involving assistance from (a) both family and church versus neither group, (b) both family and church members versus each group singly, and (c) family only versus church members only.

Multinomial regression analyses contrasting assistance from both family and church with (a) no support from either group (Model 1), (b) family support only (Model 2), and (c) church members only (Model 3) are presented in Table 1. All of the models are statistically significant. Several significant demographic relationships are apparent. Older respondents are more likely than their younger counterparts to indicate that they do not receive assistance from either group (Model 1) and to receive assistance from church members only, as compared to assistance from both family and church members (Model 3). Never married respondents are more likely than married persons to indicate that they receive support.
### Table 1
Estimated Net Multinomial Regression Effects of Demographic, Family, and Religion Variables on Receipt of Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1: Both Compared to Neither</th>
<th>Model 2: Both Compared to Family Only</th>
<th>Model 3: Both Compared to Church Only</th>
<th>Model 4: Family Only Compared to Church Only</th>
</tr>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>.0057</td>
<td>-.0342***</td>
<td>-.0399***</td>
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<td>Marital status</td>
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<td>-.2331</td>
<td>.6981</td>
<td>.9312*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
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<td>-.0216</td>
<td>-.2877</td>
<td>-.2661</td>
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<td>-.1262</td>
<td>.0517</td>
<td>.1779</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>-.1439</td>
<td>-.1404</td>
<td>.8594*</td>
<td>.9998*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>-.0505</td>
<td>.4853*</td>
<td>.5358*</td>
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<td>-.2050</td>
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<td>West</td>
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<td>-.8893**</td>
<td>-.7470</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
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<td>-.0574</td>
<td>.2103</td>
<td>.2677</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family closeness</td>
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<td>.2369*</td>
<td>.6392***</td>
<td>.4023**</td>
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<td>Family contact</td>
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<td>.1170</td>
<td>.1395</td>
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<tr>
<td>Church participation</td>
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<td>.8406***</td>
<td>-.0527</td>
<td>-.8934***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
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<td>-.2461</td>
<td>.6263*</td>
<td>.8724**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>-.2.8923***</td>
<td>-.0202</td>
<td>2.8722**</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** $N = 1,597.$

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

from both family and church members, as opposed to support from church members only (Model 3). Men are less likely than women to receive support from church members only, as compared with both family and church (Model 3). One significant regional difference indicates that respondents who reside in the West are less likely to receive assistance from family only (as compared to both family and church members) than are respondents who reside in the South (Model 2). With respect to parental status, respondents who have children are more likely than those without children to indicate that
they receive assistance from both groups as compared to neither group (Model 1), and they are more likely to indicate that they receive support from both groups as opposed to church members only (Model 2).

Several significant relationships involving family and religious network factors are evident. Family closeness is significantly associated with receiving support from both family and church members (vs. neither), family only (vs. both), and church only (vs. both). Respondents who indicate that their families are emotionally close are more likely to receive support from both groups as opposed to (a) neither group, (b) family members only, and (c) church members only (Models 1-3). Additionally, persons who report more frequent interaction with family members are more likely to receive support from both groups (Model 1). Respondents who participate in religious activities more frequently are more likely to receive assistance from both groups, compared to neither group (Model 1), and they are more likely to receive assistance from both groups, compared to family only (Model 2). Parents are more likely than nonparents to receive assistance from both groups as compared to neither group (Model 1) and from both family and church as compared to church members only (Model 3).

Table 1 also presents the multinomial regression analyses comparing assistance from family only with assistance from church members only (Model 4). Younger persons are more likely to indicate that they receive support from family only. Persons who are divorced and never married are more likely than married respondents to indicate that they receive support from family only. Men are more likely than women to indicate that they receive support from family only as compared to church only. Respondents who indicate that their families are emotionally close are more likely to indicate that they receive support from family only. More important, persons with high levels of participation in organized religious activities are more likely to indicate that they receive help from church members only. Last, parents are more likely than nonparents to report that they receive assistance from family members only as compared to church members only.
DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated that a majority of African American respondents in this sample received informal social support from both family members and church members. Roughly one third received help from at least one source, the majority received aid from both family and church members, and only a few indicated that they did not receive assistance from either group. These findings are consistent with other work with regard to the importance of church and kinship networks in the lives of African Americans (Billingsley, 1992, 1999; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Staples & Johnson, 1993).

Among the approximately one third of respondents who reported only one source of support, family members, rather than church members, were more likely to be the group providing assistance (27% vs. 8%, respectively). This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the primacy of kinship bonds in defining supportive networks and relationships. Familial bonds are often regarded as normative and governed by notions of filial obligation and responsibility. In contrast, relationships and social networks within churches reflect greater degrees of freedom of choice and individual preference. Despite the fact that respondents often equate relationships with church members with genuine kinship bonds and relations (i.e., blood- or marriage-related), actual norms and behaviors for offering and receiving support from church members may be less conducive to the types and extent of supportive exchanges found within families. Despite the importance of church-based supportive relationships for some respondents, filial obligations and authentic kinship bonds may take precedence over quasi-kin associations. Furthermore, events such as marital transitions (e.g., divorce, separation) and geographic relocation may disrupt social relationships with a church, requiring that individuals establish membership and relationships in new churches (Taylor & Chatters, 1988).

An examination of the relationships between the family and church factors and the receipt of assistance indicates that respondents who are involved with both their family and church networks
tend to receive assistance from both groups. Respondents who indicated that their families were subjectively closer, who interacted with their families on a more frequent basis, and who participated in church activities more frequently had a higher likelihood of receiving assistance from both groups (Model 1). Conversely, respondents who were not involved with either family or church networks did not receive support from either group. These findings are consistent with research in the field of family relations, which indicates that integration in family networks is positively associated with receiving support from family members (Antonucci, 1985). Similarly, research on church support networks (Krause, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998; Maton, 1989; Pargament, Silverman, Johnson, Echemendia, & Snyder, 1983) indicates that involvement in church networks is associated with higher levels of received assistance.

The findings further indicate that persons who were involved with only one group (whether family or church) tended to receive assistance from that group (Model 4). For instance, respondents who had high levels of church participation but low levels of family integration received assistance exclusively from church members. Conversely, respondents who had low levels of church participation (or did not attend church) but high levels of integration in their family network received assistance exclusively from their family members. These findings show the importance of examining the patterns of relationships and the different sources of assistance available to individuals. In sum, the findings indicate that when contrasting support from either family or church (Model 4), family closeness was associated with receiving assistance from families, whereas religious activity was associated with assistance from church members.

Overall, the findings suggest that an elaboration of the family surrogate model (Glock, Ringer, & Babbie, 1967) was useful for explaining how church support networks may compensate for the absence of family bonds. These findings indicated that church members may function as alternate sources of assistance for individuals who, for perhaps a variety of reasons (e.g., emotional estrangement, geographic distance), do not have access to family
support resources or do not have significant levels of contact and emotional intimacy with family. Persons who were not parents were more likely to report that they received support from church members compared to both church and family (Model 3) and to family only (Model 4). Respondents who were childless were more likely to indicate that they did not receive help from either group (Model 1). Reflecting the role of emotional intimacy in predicting sources of assistance, lower levels of perceived family closeness were associated with a greater likelihood of receiving support from church members only (when compared to both groups in Model 3 and to family only in Model 4). Somewhat surprisingly, low levels of family closeness were associated with a greater likelihood of receiving support from family only as compared to both groups (Model 2). Perhaps most telling with respect to the centrality of qualitative perceptions of social relationships for general support, persons with low levels of family closeness were more likely to report that they did not receive assistance from either family or church members (Model 1). Turning to family interaction, high levels of family contact were associated with receiving support from both family and church; conversely, low levels of family contact were associated with not receiving aid from either group (Model 1).

Although not the specific focus of this investigation, there were several significant demographic correlates of support from family and church members. Older respondents were less likely than their younger counterparts to receive assistance from either group (Model 1). This is consistent with previous research indicating that age is negatively associated with receiving assistance from family members (Taylor, 1986) and church members (Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Older respondents were also more likely to receive assistance from their church members only, as compared to both groups (Model 3) and as compared to family members exclusively (Model 4). With respect to gender differences, men were less likely than women to indicate that they received assistance exclusively from church members (compared with both groups in Model 3 and with family members only in Model 4). This finding is consistent with research on religious participation in which Black women are much more involved in churches than are Black men. In particular, Black
women attend religious services on a more frequent basis (Chatters, Taylor, & Lincoln, 1999; Taylor, 1988) and are more likely to be church members (Taylor, 1988) than men. Collectively, the present findings indicate that although there are no consistent gender differences across all comparisons for receiving support from family and church members, among that small group of individuals who receive support exclusively from church members (whether in comparison to both groups or family only), women were more likely than men to receive assistance, independent of level of church involvement.

Turning to marital status differences, never married respondents were more likely than their married counterparts to indicate that they receive assistance from both groups as opposed to church members exclusively. Similarly, both never married and divorced respondents were more likely than their married counterparts to receive assistance exclusively from family members as opposed to church members only (Model 4). Overall, these findings indicate only a few marital status differences in the receipt of support from both family and church members. However, among those respondents who received assistance from only one group, divorced and never married persons were more likely than their married counterparts to receive support from family members as opposed to church members. This finding is consistent with previous research that demonstrates attenuated levels of religious participation among nonmarried African Americans (Chatters et al., 1999) but is clearly at odds with the general expectations of the family surrogate model.

Last, this analysis indicated that the pattern of relationships involving parental status were more complicated than would be predicted by the family surrogate model. Specifically, in some respects, respondents who were parents had a support advantage relative to those individuals who were childless. Parents had a greater likelihood of receiving assistance from both family and church members than those adults who were childless (Models 1 and 3). These results are consistent with other work indicating that parents are generally more integrated in social support networks than nonparents. This parental advantage is evident among samples of Black adults generally (Taylor, 1986) as well as among elderly
Black adults (Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 1985; Taylor, 1986; Taylor & Chatters, 1986a, 1986b). There were two instances (Model 3 contrasting both and church only and Model 4 contrasting family and church assistance) in which childless respondents were more likely to receive assistance from church members. However, in Model 1 (contrasting both family and church versus neither group), parents were more likely to receive assistance from both groups, whereas childless persons were more likely to be without support from either group. These findings, in conjunction with the marital status results, suggest that a simple family surrogate explanation is of limited utility for understanding the more complex role that marital and parental statuses play as predictors of support from church and family. In particular, the findings suggest that in contrast to the expectations of the family surrogate model, parents and married persons were advantaged with respect to supportive relationships from church members, whereas childless and unmarried persons were disadvantaged.

CONCLUSION

Although both historical and contemporaneous research have noted the importance of family and church as important support resources for African Americans, few studies have actually examined this issue with respect to the patterns of assistance from these groups. This article found that support from family and church members is conditional on social statuses (i.e., age, gender, and marital and parental statuses) and family and church network factors. It will be important to continue to investigate the antecedents and consequences of assistance from family and church networks. However, the findings of this analysis also indicate that it is crucial to examine the specific sociodemographic and network factors that predict the patterns of assistance from these sources of support. Information of this type is important for identifying which individuals may be particularly advantaged with respect to family and church support resources (e.g., parents and persons with close family relations and who are active in religious settings), as compared
to those who may be vulnerable (e.g., the elderly, persons without children, and those who are less involved in religious institutions).

REFERENCES


Linda M. Chatters is an associate professor in the Department of Health Behavior and Health Education at the School of Public Health and a faculty associate with the Program for Research on Black Americans, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. The major focus of Dr. Chatters's research has been the study of adult development and aging as it relates to the mental and physical health status and functioning of older persons in a variety of social contexts (i.e., the family, church, and community). Integral to this work is a concern with the relationships between personal and social relationships (i.e., adult children, church members, kin vs. non-kin) of older persons and individual outcomes (i.e., social support, subjective well-being, and perceptions of health status). A particular emphasis of this work has been the investigation of religious involvement among the African American population and the assessment the independent effects of relevant religious, personal, and social status factors on well-being.

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