

Harming the relationship while helping the friend: The outcomes of seeking social support about a romantic partner from women friend groups

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ABSTRACT: This study tests the idea that women friend groups might serve as conflict multipliers rather than conflict buffers during a supportive conversation about a transgression committed by a friend's male romantic partner. Two hundred and twenty nine Black and White U.S. American women completed an online survey where they thought of a recent conflict in which they were angered by something their male romantic partner said or did and talked about it with their group of women friends of the same ethnic background. The quantitative and qualitative results indicated that Black and White women friends forged an ingroup through the process of social support. This ingroup provided support that simultaneously uplifted the women friend and derogated the male partner by virtue of verbal disapproval of his negative behaviour. These effects were associated with low levels of relational closeness between the friend in distress and her male romantic partner. Contrary to the quantitative results, the qualitative findings revealed that the nuances in Black women's communication styles differentially contributed to the ways in which they talked about the conflict and the male partners' negative behaviour.

Keywords: ingroup, outgroup, women friend group, ethnicity, social support, romantic relationship closeness

Introduction

Standard research has long shown that social support groups can buffer some of the effects of stress and conflict on one's physical and mental health (i.e., Hefner, 2010; Uchino, 2006) and well-being (i.e., Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003). Yet, little is known about how social support groups affect one's romantic relationship. Although most research shows that social support groups have positive effects on romantic relationships (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992), a handful of studies have found that social support groups, particularly friends, can multiply

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conflict in one's romantic relationship rather than buffer it (Julien & Markman, 1991; Mueller, 2006; Zhang & Merolla, 2006).

An important question to consider is under what conditions might social support from a women friend group harm one's romantic partnership. One study investigating this phenomenon among married couples found that discussing marital problems with outsiders was associated with lower marital adjustment, possibly because there were too many people influencing the marriage (Julien & Markman, 1991). From this, we deduce that one reason for this social support deterioration effect could be the nature of conversation among friends about one's male romantic partner. This current study uses the social identity framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to uncover four factors that might influence the supportive communication experience among women friends and associate with counter-theoretical outcomes.

First, women friends form an "ingroup" (a small social group sharing similar attributes and produces feelings of solidarity and exclusivity) on the basis of their shared gender identity during a supportive interaction. Research suggests that women are motivated to gather together under times of stress (tend and befriend theory; Taylor et al., 2000) and that communication can enhance their connectedness and group ties (social identity perspective, Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Reid, 2006). With this in mind, the communication among a women friend group during a supportive encounter can help cultivate group bonds. Second, support from the group about a conflict between a friend and a non-group member (e.g., male romantic partner) is intended to uplift the friend in her time of distress. Research from the social identity perspective suggests that the presence of a threat to a member (e.g., transgression by a male romantic partner) can directly or indirectly threaten the group's esteem and mar their group identity (collective self-esteem, Crocker, & Luhtanen, 1990). Ingroups are motivated to protect fellow group members from potential harm because they want to maintain a positive group identity. Under these conditions, closely-bonded groups help fellow members under distress to enhance the way the member feels about her/himself. With the research in mind, the friend group may bias their support to the woman by highlighting her positive attributes and minimizing her complicity in the conflict. In an attempt to provide support to the woman, friend groups might also derogate the male romantic partner because he is casted as an "outgroup member" in situations when he has "wronged" the woman. According to the research, when an ingroup privileges its members it may also identify reasons (albeit significant or insignificant) to characterize the outgroup and its members as inferior (Branscombe & Wann, 1994). The positive attitudes toward the ingroup and negative attitudes toward the outgroup as well as the desire to deflect harm are demonstrated through derogatory or denigrating remarks about the outsider(s). This means that the support from friends may enhance the woman's esteem and feelings of connectedness to the friend group, but it can also potentially harm her perceived closeness with her male romantic partner. Casting the partner as an outsider through derogatory "supportive" messages and thereby harming the relationship is the third factor considered.

Finally, given the critical role of communication among friends in a social support interaction, this study also considers possible ethnic differences in communication practices between groups of Black and White women friends. This study predicts that an "intergroup delineation" process (cultivating an ingroup while isolating a relevant outgroup) exists for both Black and White women, but the associations are stronger for Black women because of

their strong relational bonds as a social group and existing tensions with Black men. The current investigation provides an initial test of this argument.

Women cultivate an “ingroup”

Belongingness to a group is believed to be an evolutionary adaptation to prolong survival (Reid, Zhang, Giles, & Harwood, 2010), wherein humans have a strong sense for belonging and motivation to identify and evaluate themselves in relation to a group of similar others (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007). Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed social identity theory (1979) to conceptualize the underlying psychological mechanisms for self-identification with a social group. The main tenant is that groups sharing the same social identity (an individual's self concept derived from perceived membership with a social group) tend to internalize their group membership and evaluate their sense of self according to shared group attributes.

An all-women friend circle is a befitting context to apply the group identification process because women have a strong preference to associate with other women in their day-to-day lives, including significant life events. Explanations for this idea are multifaceted. For example the desire may be physiologically stimulated. Tend and befriend theory (Taylor et al., 2000) asserts that women are physiologically motivated to affiliate with other women under conditions of stress for joint protection and security. The theory posits that women faced with impending threat will release oxytocin (a hormone that facilitates social bonding) to promote “tending” and “befriending” behaviours instead of the typical “fight or flight” response. Under imminent threat, women will “befriend” other women to reduce social threats and help increase their access to those who can help them tend to their family. According to the theory, the social support function in women friendships is a critical strategy to assist prolonged survival for distressed women. Coupled with the physiological motivation, women may also feel comfortable relating with other women during troubling life circumstances because of their shared identity. Women value affiliating with other women who share a similar social experience on the basis of a(n) gender, sex, race, physical, religious and/or age identity (e.g., Clark & Ayers, 1992). When these women congregate together, their collective can become a safe space for members to openly communicate about personal stressors and life strains. In this environment, women can extend sympathy and support to those in need because they, too, may have experienced something similar. Research is highly suggestive of these unique group characteristics. For instance, Voss, Markiewicz, and Doyle (1999) found that women rated their same-sex friendships higher on positive friendship dimensions, such as support, concern, and security, compared to men's same-sex friendships. Considering women characterize their collective as highly affiliative, cooperative, and an emotional resource (see Hall, 2011 for meta-analysis), it makes sense that they want to identify with other women who share similar attributes and experiences in moments of hardship.

Communication (i.e., self-disclosure and emotional availability) and time spent together are critical dimensions of women's friendships (Hall, 2011). Women groups that frequently engage with each other become more privy to intimate information about all aspects of each other's lives, making them a viable place for women to seek social support on a myriad of topics when they are upset, sad, or distressed about life stressors. Quite commonly, close friend groups communicate on a consistent basis about various personal

issues, including romance. Romantic relationships are important to women, and when the romance develops, the romantic partner is integrated into the social fabric of women's lives. Considering that friendship groups are established at an early age among adolescent girls and exist in some form across the lifespan (Hartup & Stevens, 1997), women should continue nurturing relational ties (Ledbetter, Griffin, & Sparks, 2007) with their women friends while simultaneously cultivating a romantic relationship with a potential male suitor. Since friends are an important source of support (Walen & Lachman, 2000), women often maintain their romantic relationships with the help and support from their friend confidants. As women develop close bonds with both friends and a romantic partner, it makes sense that they frequently discuss relational issues among the friend group and even seek support when the relationship is strained (Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995).

Seeking support from this highly affiliative and close-knit group is advantageous. First, the group can heighten a friends' mental, physiological, and sociological well-being (for review see Knickmeyer, Sexton, & Nishimura, 2002). Women friend groups can make timely provisions to meet a woman's needs by serving both emotional functions (e.g., when a friend attempts to lessen or alleviate another's hurts and disappointments or helps manage the emotions associated with the stressor) and instrumental functions (e.g., when a friend provides tangible support or services to help alleviate the stressor) (Rawlins, 2009; Wright & Scanlon, 1991). Friend groups can also buffer the deleterious effects of stress when making support provision during a woman's moment of distress (Walen & Lachman, 2000). In all, women reap a host of benefits when seeking support from their group of friends, but groups that communicate frequently about their life strains, including conversations about romantic relationship issues, are likely to enhance empathetic understanding and subsequent solidarity (Hall, 2011) because the women are constantly sharing information about their personal lives to familiar others who care about their well-being. In this case, the communication facilitates a space for identifying, sharing and supporting one another through difficult times to increase bonding and closeness among the group.

Close-knit friend groups can play a significant role in the way a woman feels about herself. According to the social identity framework, a woman, for example, is not an idiosyncratic person but a member of a larger social group, whose self image stems from how she interacts with other members of the group with whom she identifies (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). From this rubric, it is assumed that individuals strive to elevate positive feelings about themselves by enhancing positive feelings about their social group identity (i.e., self-esteem) through various in-group protection behaviours. This means that an imminent threat to a fellow ingroup member (e.g., woman friend is hurt by her partner's transgression) has implications for the group's identity because each member's sense of self is tightly intertwined with the group (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). Thus, if one member is threatened, all group members will be directly or indirectly impacted. In situations when the group is faced with potential harm or negativity from outsiders, group members are motivated to display ingroup bias (reject negative information about the fellow member and only emphasize their positive attributes) as a form of protection against the external threat and identity maintenance. Theoretically speaking, the group's desire to maintain a positive social identity under times of threat prompts its members to provide positive and uplifting messages to a member under attack which should ultimately associate with enhanced esteem. For example, Verkuyten (2007) found that ingroup favouritism momentarily enhanced collective self-esteem (a person's sense of self according to their

interaction with relevant social group members). It is expected that the empirical findings hold true after group evaluations are made among women friend groups during support provision. More specifically, when a woman is hurt by a transgression committed by her male romantic partner, her distress is a concern for both herself and her close-knit friend group. The friend group is motivated to enhance the way the woman feels about herself (i.e., self-esteem) as a means of protecting the group's collective identity. This is accomplished with support that minimizes her complicity in the conflict, emphasizes her superiority over her partner (the harmful outgroup member), and celebrates her positive attributes. In fact, a few studies show that the women friend group enhances self-esteem in its members (Stein, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1992; Thomas & Daubman, 2001) while other research indicates that social support provision from women friend groups significantly enhances self-esteem (Voss, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 1999). The social support, friendship, and social identity research collectively suggest that frequent communication among women friend circles may momentarily enhance a woman's feelings of solidarity with her friends during a supportive interaction, and thus elevate the way she feels about herself as a member of her close-knit group. Ingroup formation among friends and its affirmative outcomes (solidarity and esteem) is the first factor under investigation.

Women delineate an "outgroup"

Even though communication during the supportive encounter can strengthen the group's relational ties and indirectly uplift her sense of self (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland 1991), it could simultaneously harm the relationship with her male romantic partner. Whenever groups are confronted with a situation in which some intergroup categorization appears, individuals are likely to behave in a manner that discriminates against the outgroup and favors the ingroup (ingroup bias, Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004; Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010). This is particularly true when there is existing hostility and negative attitudes toward the outgroup (Brewer, 2001; Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2000). In the context of the current study, a friend group may discriminate against the male romantic partner when he transgresses against their friend. The relational conflict constitutes a negative intergroup contact between men and women, which heightens the group's desire to uplift the woman (as an ingroup member) in her time of distress and emphasize her superiority over the man (as an outgroup member). This means the friend group may favor the woman during the supportive conversation by taking her position in the argument and/or communicating messages that uplift her spirits. This occurs while concurrently discriminating against the male romantic partner because he represents a male outgroup member who has hurt their fellow ingroup member. Since women speak frequently about their life's occurrences, including relational events, it is possible that this is not the first time the women have heard about the male romantic partners' relational transgressions. Thus the repeated behavior could lead the group to hold existing negative attitudes about the male romantic partner and establish positive ingroup distinctiveness from the outsider through verbal derogation of his personal attributes and character. This verbal strategy empowers the friend ingroup and dis-empowers the male outgroup.

Similar to the biases that ingroups show to their group members, humans enact systematic biases in how they make external attributions for their own negative behaviour (self-serving bias) and internal attributions of others' negative behaviour (see fundamental attribution bias, Ross, 1977). Combining these individual-based biases from attribution

theory (Heider, 1958) with group-level biases from the social identity framework helps explain why people favour their ingroup members in this context: people are more inclined to privilege someone similar to them because if that person is perceived negatively, then the individual is also perceived negatively. Given that individuals are biased to make attributions that favour themselves, under negative circumstances they may be inclined to make external attributions for similar others and internal attributions for dissimilar others. With reference to the friend group, women should want to make internal attributions for the negative behaviour committed by the male romantic partner because the friend group wants to maintain a positive self-identity by depicting him in a negative frame. Put together, friends that frequently discuss a woman's relational issues are more likely to provide supportive messages that denigrate the partner and his character. Delineating and denigrating the male romantic partner is the second factor considered.

Women's support and perceived relationship closeness

Most traditional social support literature suggests that social support groups, particularly friendship groups, are beneficial for individuals (Knickmeyer et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2000). However, there is limited research suggesting that women friend groups can generally harm rather than help romantic relationships. One exception is a landmark study by Julien and Markman (1991), that originally argued that women friend social support groups serve as "conflict buffers" because the support provision for a marital conflict can help minimize the stressful nature of the conflict. However, unlike what Julien and Markman originally hypothesized, the results of this study revealed that social support was detrimental to the couple's marital quality. Ultimately, discussing marital problems with outsiders was associated with lower marital adjustment, possibly because there were too many people instigating the marital conflict. Even though this study is exploring conflict in dating relationships, the idea should still hold.

One possible explanation for this social support deterioration effect could be the nature of support among a friend group about an issue concerning a woman's male romantic partner. It could be that as a friend group discusses a woman's relational problem, the friends speak negatively about the male partner in hopes of providing support to the woman in need. As mentioned, the process of support and ingroup formation could be beneficial for the woman, however the attempt at social support may also yield an undesirable outcome for the romantic relationship itself. Research from the conflict literature (see Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006 for a review) suggests that social groups can influence the nature of a conflict between romantic relational partners, wherein outsiders can interact with one partner and influence their perceptions and responses to the relational conflict. For example, when Zhang and Merolla (2006) examined the impact of friends disclosing dislike about one's romantic partner and romantic relationship, they found that 63% of the romantic relationships ended after the study, and 32% reported that their friends terminated the relationship after the conversation. Another study found that women romantic partners felt more justified in their position on a romantic conflict issue when they had support from a social group. These women were less prone to compromise on the relational issue compared to women who had less-involved support groups (Klein & Milardo, 2000). These studies suggest that seeking support from a friend group for conflict-related issues could be detrimental to the relationship under certain circumstances. Diminished

relationship quality is the associated outcome of partner derogation by the friend group and the third factor tested in this study.

The final critical component that could explain why support from friends might be associated with the support deterioration effect is the communication styles of the group members during such support attempts. Research establishes that communication during the support process differs across ethnic groups (e.g., Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Taylor et al., 2004) and one reason for this difference could be the disparate values, beliefs, and socializing messages instilled in people cross-culturally (e.g., Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). This research could be tested on a host of different ethnic groups, but this current investigation focuses on Black women. Black women have been socialized to be strong, independent and assertive (Collins, 2000), which could result in an “uplifting” of the ingroup norm of “strength” during a supportive conversation at the expense of the relationship between a woman and her man. While the “intergroup delineation” phenomenon and its association with diminished relationship quality most likely exists in White friend groups, the process is most palpable among Black women.

Ethnic considerations

The socialization of Black women as strong within the U.S. American society has historical antecedents that date to the enslavement of Black people during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth century (see Giddings, 1984; Sudarkasa, 1997). Characterizing Black women as the icon of strength means that they struggle to negotiate their inner-emotions, signifying weakness, while upholding a façade of emotional invulnerability, signifying strength (Collins, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; McNair, 1992). Strength is evident in the conversation styles and norms of Black women communicators wherein some use an assertive and direct communication style as a means of delivering messages to other Black women. And in fact many valorise their Black conversational partners for having these characteristics (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003; Popp, Donovan, Crawford, Marsh, & Peele, 2003). The high value placed upon direct, assertive, and open messages seems to influence the nature of social support provision and receipt among Black women friend groups. In fact the research suggests the support process is indeed different between Black and White women. For example, Black women place less emphasis on the pursuit of emotion-focused goals (support that attempts to alleviate another’s hurt and disappointment) and are less attentive to person-centered comforting strategies (i.e., messages that focus on the feelings of the individual rather than the problem itself) when discussing another woman’s distress than White women (Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burlison, 1997; Samter & Burlison, 2005).

Black women friend groups are unique in that their similarity and strong relational bonds are intentionally communicated to one another to foster a heightened sense of solidarity. Research notes that Black women create a discourse where their communicative messages are encoded with words that signify solidarity (i.e., Scott, 2000; Niles Goins, 2000). For example, Houston (2000) found that Black women believe their “black woman talk” is codified with a dimension of fortitude (i.e., strong, direct, challenging) and pride (i.e., self affirming, celebratory). This unique style of speech is used to develop solidarity among Black women friends (Hughes & Heuman, 2006). Considering the research, the association between communication among the group and ingroup solidarity should be exacerbated; Black women foster a strong collective, or ingroup, among their women friends using speech

styles as markers of ingroup membership (Hecht et al., 2003). When Black women affirm the use of culturally nuanced communication with others it should foster a sense of pride, increasing self-esteem within the Black women group. In other words, solidarity and esteem within Black friend groups should be enhanced after Black friends— who frequently communicate with one another— discuss a romantic relational issue.

Even though the unique codified communication among Black friend groups may uplift a woman in her time of need, it could simultaneously hurt the relationship she shares with her male romantic partner to a greater extent than White women. Socio-historically, Black women have held negative perceptions of Black men as suitable romantic partners (Edin, 2000; Porter & Bronzcraft, 1995). These negative perceptions may motivate Black friends to characterize the man (i.e., Black romantic partner) as an outgroup member, more so than White women who lack the historical tension with their White male counterparts. The negative perceptions of Black men matched with underlying negative attitudes toward Black men as suitable romantic partners can manifest in situations where Black friends are angered by something a woman's romantic partner said or did. Consequentially, Black friends may have a greater tendency to identify the male romantic partner as an outgroup member and chastise him for his wrong doings in their supportive messages compared to White women. Since prior research uncovered a detrimental effect of support from friends on relational quality (Mueller, 2006; Zhang & Merolla, 2006), it is likely that this effect will occur in both Black and White women friendships. However, the effect is probably stronger for Black friend groups because of the strength codified in Black women's communication.

With all of this research on social support among women friend groups, social identity, and the effects of inter-group delineation in mind, the following hypotheses are set forth:

- H1:** The frequency of communication among friends will interact with ethnicity (Black/White) to predict solidarity within one's friend group, such that more frequent communication among Black women friend groups will have a stronger positive association with group solidarity compared to White women friend groups.
- H2:** Solidarity within a woman's friend group will interact with ethnicity to predict collective self-esteem among the friends, such that Black women's solidarity within their friend group will have a stronger positive association with collective self-esteem than White women.
- H3:** The frequency of communication among the group will interact with ethnicity to predict derogation of the male romantic partner, such that more frequent communication among Black women friend groups will be more strongly and positively associated with partner derogation than White friends.
- H4:** Friend's derogation of the romantic partner will interact with ethnicity to predict romantic relational closeness between a woman and her partner, such that partner derogation will have a stronger negative association with Black women's perceived closeness with their partners compared to White women.

Often quantitative instruments cannot capture the complexity of communication across cultures. In fact, some researchers have identified that different social support experiences may emerge if more culturally relevant topics are included in the instruments (see discussion in Samter & Burleson, 2005). In order to account for the nuances in Black and White women's social support messages, open-ended, qualitative data were also collected.

A qualitative component was necessary to provide more depth and richness to the current investigation. A research question is posed to address this concern:

RQ: In what ways do Black and White women friend groups communicate support to a woman upset by something her male romantic partner said or did in the relationship?

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of approximately 229 women from across the United States, with half identifying as Black (n= 110) and half identifying as White (n=119). The ages ranged from 18-73 ($\mu= 24$ years). Most of the women did not have children (76%), and almost half of the women had attended some college (43%). The women were all in a monogamous dating relationship with a man of the same ethnicity (e.g., Black women with a Black male partner and White women with a White male partner) for at least two months at the time of the study. The length of the relationship ranged from two months to 40 years ($\mu= 2.94$ years), and about half were in long distance relationships (44%).

Recruitment

Black and White women were recruited primarily through electronic advertisements across the United States (U.S.). An advertisement was posted on a research subject management system to recruit undergraduate students enrolled in Communication courses at a large Western University. These participants received credit toward their research practicum requirement for their respective Communication courses. All other women who did not receive course credit, received a \$15 Starbucks gift card. Given that Black women as a social group were the primary focus for this investigation, specific efforts were made to target areas where Black women congregate. Electronic advertisements were posted to Black women's Internet blogs (i.e., "Black Women Connect") as well as Facebook pages (i.e., "Black, Female, and Proud"). Additionally, classified advertisements were posted to Craigslist in major U.S. cities (Atlanta, Sacramento, New York, Washington D.C., Los Angeles). Electronic advertisements were also sent via e-mail to the Black Studies, Women's Studies, Sociology, and Psychology Departments of 4-year university school systems across the U.S. (i.e., Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the University of California, and all-women's colleges). In addition to these forms of advertising, network sampling was used. Specifically, study participants told people in their social networks (i.e., acquaintances, family) about the study and directed interested persons to the researcher.

Implementation

The women participants completed one online survey. In the open-ended portion of the survey, the women were asked to describe a recent instance when they got in a fight with their romantic partner because of an act, personality trait, or behaviour committed by their partner. It also needed to be a conflict that they then discussed with three or more of their women friends who shared the same ethnicity (Black or White) as them. The

conversation among the friend group could have occurred face to face or via mediated communication (e.g., Skype, phone). The only specification was that the women communicated with the group of friends at the same time. Once the women identified an instance that fit these specifications, they described what they told their friends about the conflict, and then detailed how the friend group responded during the conversation about the conflict. The participants were asked to be as specific as possible (e.g., this friend said this; I responded by saying this) when they reported about the conversation among their friends. In addition to the open-ended questions, the women were asked to keep the discussion of the conflict in mind when answering survey questions from the following measures.

Measures

Communication frequency. The extent to which the women participants communicated with their friend group was measured using three items: “How often do you and these girlfriends talk (in any form of communication) with each other about conflicts in your respective romantic relationships?”, “How often do you communicate with the specific girlfriends you mentioned previously in your response about the conflicts in your romantic relationship? (This can be any form of communication, e.g., phone, face-to-face, texting, Facebook, etc.)”, and “How often do you and these specific girlfriends talk with each other face to face about the conflicts in your romantic relationships?”. The Likert-type item consisted of 1 “Less Than Once a Year”, 2 “Once a Year”, 3 “Less Than Once a Month”, 4 “More Than Once a Month”, 5 “About Once a Week”, 6 “A Few Times a Week”, and 7 “Almost Everyday.” High scores indicate greater communication frequency. The Cronbach’s alpha was .75.

Group solidarity. The extent to which the women identified with and felt connected to their friend group was assessed using the Group Identification Scale (GIS) (Brown, Condor, Mathews, Wade, & Williams, 1986). The GIS consists of 10-Likert-type items on a 5-point scale ranging from “Never” to “Very Often.” However, only 4 of these items were used in the survey. After participants wrote about the supportive conversation with their friend group and the responses they received, they were asked to indicate the extent to which the statement best described their evaluation of their women friend group, as well as their identification with the group. The items included: “I am a person who considers the group important,” “I am a person who identifies with the group,” and “I am a person who feels strong ties with the group.” The items for this scale were modified to focus on gender and the friend context. For example, the GIS item, “I am a person who considers the group important” was modified to “I am a person who considers my women friend group important.” High scores indicate the women have high levels of perceived solidarity with their friend group. The reliability was .87.

Collective esteem. Assessment of the participants’ esteem as a member of the friend group after the supportive conversation took place was measured using the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES) from Luhtanen and Crocker (1992). The CSES consists of 16- Likert-type items on a 7-point scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strong Agree.” The scale yields 4 subscales, but membership esteem (4 items) and importance to identity (4 items) were the only sub-scales used for this study. These two subscales were averaged to create one composite variable that measured global collective self- esteem among the friend group (see

also Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994). Participants indicated the extent to which the statement best described their perspective of the collective identity for their friend group. The items for these two sub-scales were modified to focus on gender and the friend context. For example, the membership CSES item, "The social groups I belong to are an important reflection of who I am" was modified to "My women friend group is an important reflection of who I am," and "In general, belonging to social groups is an important part of my self image" was changed to "In general, belonging to my women friend group is an important part of my self image." High scores indicate high collective self-esteem. The Cronbach's alpha was .76.

Outgroup derogation. Derogation of the male romantic partner was measured using 10 (of the original 27) items from the "Derogation of competitors" reports from Buss and Dedden (1990). The items were modified to remove biased language. Women participants were asked to respond to questions about the types of messages their friends (as a collective group) said about the male romantic partner. Example items include, "My friends indicated my romantic partner has no goals" and "My friends put down my romantic partners' intelligence." Responses ranged from 1 being "Never" to 5 being "Very Often." Higher scores indicate greater derogation. The Cronbach's Alpha was .88.

Perceived romantic relationship closeness. A woman's perceived relational closeness with her partner was measured with a scale from Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) consisting of 4 Likert-type items (of the original 10). Participants were asked to respond to questions assessing how close they felt to their romantic partner after the supportive conversation, with example items including "How openly did you talk with your partner?" and "How close did you feel to your partner?". Responses to each item were measured with 1 meaning "Not at All" to 7 meaning "Extremely." Higher scores indicate higher levels of relational closeness. The reliability was .84.

Data Analysis Plan

A four-stage thematic analysis was used to analyze participants' recollection of their friends' responses when conversing about the relational issue with the male romantic partner. First, two research assistants read the data and took general notes about any overarching themes that surfaced from the friends' responses. Purposeful attempts were made to remain open-minded and let the themes emerge naturally from the participants' perspectives. The research assistants discussed these overarching themes with the primary investigator. Then the outside coders and the researcher read through the data again, refining the themes and developing properties (or characteristics) for each of the themes. The constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to decipher the themes and their properties, in which the themes were broken down into subcategories. The coders and researcher then read over the data a third time, refining the preliminary categories that were developed. Throughout this entire process, the categories were continually compared and contrasted with one another, adjusting them for discrepant cases and new insights (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once the themes were refined, the primary researcher reviewed the data to identify quotes from the responses to illustrate each of the categories and their subcategories. Finally, the researchers used selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and identified the overarching "story" that connected the different ways Black and White friends responded. An inductive content analysis was also conducted to provide

supplemental information on the nature of the relational conflict and conversations about the relational conflict among friends. The analysis also provided frequency counts for the various conflict topics, common ways the conflict was re-told to the friend group, and the responses from friends (see Table 2).

Results

Preliminary Results

The means, standard deviations and correlations for the variables used in the analyses are provided in Table 1. Black and White women reported moderate levels of relational closeness and conflict with their male romantic partner. The average length of time since the conflict episode occurred was two weeks prior to the completion of the survey ($M = 13$ days).

Two coders also used inductive analysis (Bulmer, 1979) to categorize the topics that were the source of conflict between the romantic partners. The coders established excellent intercoder reliability (Guetkow's P ranging from .92 to .94; Guetzkow, 1950). The women reported numerous topics of conflict and various responses from their women friends about the conflict (see Table 2). The most frequently reported topic of conflict for Black and White women was trust in the romantic relationship.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Educational level	3.75	1.46	-								
2. Importance of conflict	5.57	1.38	-.05	-							
3. Ethnic background	-	.50	.44**	.13	-						
4. Relationship length (years)	2.94	4.95	.14*	-.10	.31**	-					
5. Friend communication	2.25	1.12	.35**	-.01	.49**	.23**	-				
6. Gender group solidarity	4.19	0.77	.20**	0.05	0.12	0.03	.10*	-			
7. Collective self-esteem	5.37	.97	.08	.09	-.02	-.06	.03	.49**	-		
8. Outgroup derogation	1.76	.80	-.05	.19*	-.08	-.17*	.20**	.10	-.01	-	
9. Perceived relational closeness	5.61	1.29	-.03	-.16*	-.08	.11	.06	.03	.01	-.35**	-

Note: Ethnic background was dummy coded (0=White and 1=Black); ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Topics of conflict	Black Women	White Women
1. Conflicting opinions regarding relationship	6(6)	20(16)
2. Future plans	5(5)	0
3. Trust in relationship:	17(18)	27(22)
Lack of trust in partner		
Jealousy		
Lying		
4. Spending time together	12(13)	23(19)
5. Religious values	1(1)	2(2)
6. Sex/Intimacy	1(1)	3(2)
7. Substance abuse	0	8(7)
8. Friends/family affecting relationship:	7(7)	1(.8)
Family influence (on relationship)		
Poor advice from friends		
9. Poor communication between partners:	16(17)	31(25)
Disrespectful verbal communication		
Not verbally expressing feelings		
Not listening		
Insufficient mediated communication		
Not reciprocating affectionate communication		
10. Partner plays rough	0	2(2)
11. Finances:	5(5)	5(4)
Finances affecting relationship		
Irresponsible with money		
12. Domestic support	8(9)	0
13. Doesn't share relationship with friends	4(4)	0
14. Questioned partners' abilities/ideas:	12(13)	1(.8)
Irresponsible with time		
Complain minute tasks		
Questioned partners' capabilities		
Total (N=217)	94	123

Note: The numbers to the left are frequencies and the numbers in parentheses are percentages.

Quantitative Results

Hypothesis one. Hierarchical regression was used to test the first hypothesis that frequent communication among friends and ethnicity would interact to predict greater group solidarity after a supportive conversation. Education level, conflict importance, and romantic relationship length were entered into the first step of the model as control variables, followed by the main effects of frequent communication among friends and ethnicity in the second step. The interaction term, which was represented by the product of ethnicity and frequency of communication, was entered in the subsequent step. The interaction between ethnicity and frequency of friend communication was not significant (see Table 3). The control variable, education level ($\beta = .24$, $t = 3.13$, $p = .002$), was significant. Women with higher levels of education reported a greater sense of solidarity with their friend group after the support conversation. Above and beyond the effect for the control variable, there was a main effect for frequency of communication among friends (β

= .26, $t = 1.95$, $p = .05$). In other words, after a supportive conversation women felt connected to friends with whom they frequently communicate.

Dependent Variable		<i>R2 change</i>	<i>F change</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Gender solidarity						
	Step 1:	0.05	3.08			
	Length of relationship			-.01	-.06	0.95
	Conflict importance			0.04	0.5	0.62
	Educational level			0.21	3.01	<0.001*
	Step 2:	0.04	4.35			
	Friend communication			0.26	1.95	.05*
	Ethnic background			0.12	1.35	0.18
	Step 3:	0	0.04			
	Friend communication x Ethnic background			0.02	0.19	0.85
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$						

Hypothesis two. Hierarchical regression was also used to test the hypothesis that group solidarity predicts greater collective self-esteem. Education level, conflict importance, and romantic relationship length were entered into the first step of the model as control variables, followed by the main effects of group solidarity and ethnicity. Finally, the interaction term of group solidarity and ethnicity was entered in the third step. The interaction term and the control variables were non-significant (see Table 4). There was a significant main effect of group solidarity on collective self-esteem ($\beta = .42$, $t = 5.23$, $p < .001$). In other words, women had greater esteem about their membership in the group when feelings of solidarity among friends were high.

Dependent Variable		<i>R2 change</i>	<i>F change</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Collective Self Esteem						
	Step 1:	0.01	0.76			
	Length of relationship			-0.03	-.38	0.71
	Conflict importance			0.03	.51	0.61
	Educational level			0.03	.35	0.72
	Step 2:	0.23	30.37			
	Gender solidarity			0.42	5.23	<.001**
	Ethnic background			-0.08	-1.08	0.28
	Step 3:	0.01	1.66			
	Gender solidarity x Ethnic background			0.10	1.29	0.20
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$						

Hypothesis three. Hierarchical regression was used to test the hypothesis that frequent communication among friends and ethnicity would interact to predict greater outgroup derogation of the male romantic partner. Education level, conflict importance, and relationship length were entered into the first step of the model as control variables, followed by the main effects of frequent communication among a group of friends and ethnicity, and finally the interaction terms of friend communication and ethnic background in the third step. The interaction was non-significant (see Table 5). Only one control variable, conflict importance, was significantly and positively associated with outgroup derogation ($\beta = .22$, $t = 3.23$, $p < .001$). In other words, highly important relational conflicts predicted more derogation of the male romantic partner by the friend group. Above and beyond the effect for conflict importance, group communication frequency ($\beta = .06$, $t = .48$, $p = .05$) had a significant main effect on outgroup derogation. Friend groups that frequently communicated tended to derogate the romantic partner during the supportive conversation.

Dependent Variable	<i>R2 change</i>	<i>F change</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Outgroup derogation					
Step 1:	0.08	5.37			
Length of relationship			-0.12	-1.71	0.09
Conflict importance			0.22	3.24	<.001**
Educational level			0.03	0.44	0.66
Step 2:	0.04	4.44			
Friend communication			-0.06	-0.48	0.05*
Ethnic background			0.01	0.10	0.92
Step 3:	0.01	2.90			
Friend communication x Ethnic background			-0.20	-1.70	0.09
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$					

Hypothesis four. Finally, hierarchical regression was used to test the hypothesis that outgroup derogation of the male romantic partner and ethnicity interact to predict lower perceived relational closeness. Education level, conflict importance, and relationship length were entered into the first step of the model as control variables, followed by the main effect for outgroup derogation and ethnicity in the second step. Finally, the interaction between outgroup derogation and ethnicity was entered into the third step. The interaction term and the control variables were non-significant (see Table 6). However, outgroup derogation was negatively associated with perceived relational closeness ($\beta = -.38$, $t = -4.19$, $p < .001$). Women reported lower levels of closeness with their romantic partner after their friends derogated him in the support conversation.

Dependent Variable		<i>R</i> ² change	<i>F</i> change	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Perceived relational closeness	Step 1:	0.03	1.97			
	Length of relationship			0.09	1.29	0.30
	Conflict importance			-0.14	-1.95	0.61
	Educational level			-0.06	-0.88	0.72
	Step 2:	0.11	12.17			
	Outgroup derogation			-0.38	-4.19	<.001**
	Ethnic background			-0.12	-1.49	0.14
	Step 3:	0.00	0.69			
	Outgroup derogation x			0.08	0.83	0.41
	Ethnic background					

p*< .05; *p*< .01

Qualitative Results

The conversation among friends about the conflict with a romantic partner revealed interesting parallels and contrasts with the quantitative data. The participants were asked to report what their friend group said and what words or phrases were used when discussing the conflict incident. During the thematic analysis, ethnic differences surfaced, suggesting that the communication characteristics of members of the friend group during support attempts may differ as a function of ethnicity. Three themes were deductively identified: one theme represents the similarities between Black and White women and the other two themes represent the differences. Black and White friend groups tended to provide advice that uplifted the women when they were distressed but often times the support they provided criticized the man's behaviour or character. Above and beyond the similarities, however, were cultural differences in the way friends communicated support. These themes are discussed below.

Friend groups uplifting in times of distress

Validating the woman's feelings regarding her partners' behaviour was often the primary support strategy provided by the group of friends, regardless of whether or not the group agreed with the woman's position. Black and White participants reported that their friends aligned with their position and validated their perspective on the conflict:

They understood and backed me up on what I said about the issue at hand. They told me to tell him what I thought and felt about it and told me that I had every right to feel that way. I was worried that I was being overly dramatic, and when they said that most girls would be livid about it, it made me feel more chill. (White participant)

Often the friends would uplift the woman by derogating the male romantic partner, regardless of whether the woman was White or Black. Some women participants reported that their friends validated their feelings by criticizing their partners' character and behaviour. In other responses, the friends identified the participant's positive attributes to

remind her that the male partner did not deserve to be in a relationship with her if he continued to behave in a negative manner. For example, one Black woman noted:

[They] made comments that made me feel better because they just said that I am better than him. They reminded me about all of my great qualities, how me and my boyfriend aren't compatible because he has ZERO good qualities. They just said that I deserve way better.

Strategies for resolution to the conflict was another common message from the group, in that the friends often ended the conversation by providing some type of advice that encouraged the woman to put forth action for resolving the conflict. Despite previous literature suggesting that Black and White women tend to provide different types of social support (e.g., Samter & Burleson, 2005) participants did not discriminate against affective or instrumental support. Rather, responses showed that the friends simply said anything that would make the woman feel better; all of the support was for her benefit:

[She] kept the focus on me, the children, and just how important it was for me to have faith in the Lord. She said that she was praying for me and for him as well. (Black participant)

The supportive messages from Black and White friend groups reportedly uplifted the women in their time of distress but also derogated partners for their wrong-doings. In line with what we hypothesized, supportive messages concurrently empowered the women but disempowered the partner.

Harming while helping among White friend groups

Although the intergroup delineation phenomenon was similar during supportive conversations among Black and White friend groups, the way this was accomplished differed significantly. White friends tended to side with the woman because they knew that strategy would make the woman feel better about herself and the situation. At the same time, the White friend group also acknowledged the male romantic partner's perspective more than Black women. Meaning, the responses to the open-ended questions suggest that the White friend group made a point to acknowledge both the male partner's and the woman's perspective on the conflict. The responses revealed that there was a constant tension or "tug-and-pull" between reinforcing what the friend wanted to hear while suggesting that the boyfriend was a "good guy" and that his negative behaviour was abnormal. In other responses by White women, the friends continued to validate their friend's feelings while simultaneously giving her partner the benefit of the doubt:

They told me that although he's a sweet heart and a good boyfriend to me, that he's not as motivated as me and it's clearly become a problem in our relationship. (White participant)

The few times they thought their friend was at fault, the group took the partner's side but continued to acknowledge and validate the friend's feelings. For example, one woman wrote, "They just laughed and said, knowing him, he didn't mean it the way I took it but they can see where I'm coming from and understand why I'm hurt." The open-ended remarks reveal that White friends were much more likely than Black friends to express their

dual concern for both the woman friend and the male romantic partner, providing a fair and balanced perspective of both sides.

Harming while helping among Black friend groups

Unlike White women, Black women were more forthright in their opinions of the conflict and typically sided with the male partner or with the woman friend but not both. Specifically, Black friends used more direct messages to signal agreement with the woman and derogate the male partners' behavior. Or, on the contrary, they would signal agreement with the male partner and directly communicate to the woman the error of her ways. In other responses, the Black friends did not even acknowledge their friend's position in the argument. Unlike the White friends who made a point to validate the friend's perspective even though they disagreed, the Black friends had no qualms with showing their friend the error of her ways. This was illustrated by one Black woman who noted, "They disagreed with me, said he was a good person and could understand why he would lie about the situation."

In contrast to White women who refrained from outwardly disagreeing with the friend or identifying where she took fault in the situation, the responses revealed that Black friends were much more blunt: "They said that I needed to stop giving him these 'love tests' and said 'you know that he loves you, that is the only way he would put up with your extreme emotions.' They also said that he is a good man." Black friends provided advice and support that seemed to illegitimate the friend's feelings and stance on the argument, and unlike White women, did not feel the urge to couch their opinions in between messages of partner derogation and emotional validation for the woman friend. Moreover, even when Black women supported the male partner's perspective, their advice on ways to remedy the situation often came at the expense of the Black woman. Some Black friends even went as far as to show the woman how her actions exacerbated the situation:

They hold him in high esteem...All three admired his willingness in the end to talk and work with me and made me realize that he was unaware of how I felt and a lot of this was my fault because I could not articulate it. (Black participant)

There were also many instances where the Black friends sided with the friend. But unlike the White friends who sent double-barrelled messages that acknowledged both sides, when Black women supported the woman, they, in turn, derogated the partner using much harsher language: "They all began to say things like, girl he aint NO GOOD! He's just like all the rest of them niggas. Dump his ass." Often times the derogation resulted in advice to terminate the relationship: "Basically told me to dump him because he was a low down dirty DOG who needed therapy." The use of strong, derogatory language among Black women was a marker of the assertiveness of Black women's speech patterns; firmly derogating the partner's character created an ingroup/outgroup distinction. Also, unlike the White friend's responses, Black women entered into a unique banter, such that the words they used had a stronger, more abrasive tone, and the phrases followed a unique rhythm. For example, rather than mentioning that the male romantic partner was a "dog," the friends mentioned that he was a "low down dirty DOG who needed therapy." The additional descriptive words reflect the metaphoric "sting" that accompanies many Black women's language patterns, which often cannot be adequately captured with quantitative measures. Their words carry

a certain undertone (and sometimes overtone) that is unique to their particular speech style, and quite distinctive from the communicative processes of White women. Also, their words signify a more honest (rather than filtered) response to the conflict situation that was not evident in the responses from White friends.

Discussion

Women friendship circles are often characterized as a beneficial source of guidance, advice, and emotional resources to fight against the deleterious effects of various stressors. Traditional social support research suggests that friends serve as conflict buffers, but a handful of cross-disciplinary studies suggest otherwise (Julien & Markman, 1991; Mueller, 2006). Under situations when women enter into conflict with their male romantic partner and seek support from their women friend groups, the group of friends can serve as conflict multipliers rather than conflict buffers. Even though the studies establishing friends as conflict multipliers are rare, they do provide preliminary evidence for this counterintuitive finding. What researchers do not know are the theoretical explanations for this phenomenon, the ways in which the friend group might affect the romantic relationship itself and if the social support provided by women friends differs according to the ethnicity of the friend group.

The current study used the social identity framework to conceptualize the social support experience as a process of intergroup delineation between the group of women friends (as ingroup members) and the male romantic partner (as an outgroup member). It was hypothesized and empirically supported that the process of creating a friend “ingroup” with women who communicate frequently with each other was significantly related to enhanced group solidarity (H1) and collective self-esteem (H2). When ingroups were formed and threats from an outsider were present, the friend group casted the romantic partner as an outgroup member by verbally derogating his negative behaviour and even character (H3). Finally, the study predicted that partner derogation was associated with lower levels of relational closeness between the romantic couple (H4).

The significant main effects from the quantitative results revealed that the major components of the social identity perspective, particularly the creation of an ingroup and delineation of the outgroup, predicted lower relational closeness with male romantic partners for both Black and White women. Though outgroup derogation occurred less frequently ($\mu = 1.76$) and relationship closeness was quite high ($\mu = 5.61$), the statistical regression revealed that friends derogating the romantic partner in their supportive messages predicted low perceived relational closeness for both Black and White women (H4). Thus, our hypothesis of a support deterioration effect was supported. The non-significant interactions and significant main effects suggest the intergroup delineation process is comparable for Black and White women. This is surprising considering that empirical research suggests culture has a large impact on dimensions of friendship (e.g., Collier, 1991; 1996; Goins, 2011; Griffin, Amodeo, Clay, Fassler, & Ellis, 2006) and social support (e.g., Samter & Burleson, 2005). It could be that the urge to assist a friend in times of trouble is an innate response. As tend and befriend theory suggests (Taylor et al., 2000), all women are physiologically motivated to affiliate with each other under distressing circumstances. As such, race is a less critical factor than other variables, which explains why Black and White friends may foster in-group bonds similarly. Interestingly, the qualitative

findings confirm the quantitative findings, as well as uncover a few ethnic differences that could not be captured with quantitative measures. In general, the open-ended responses from the surveys revealed that both Black and White women uplifted the woman friend while derogating her male partner by virtue of verbal disapproval of his negative behaviour. However, the nature of the support was different for Black women, such that the language was more direct, the friends were more forthright with their opinions, and more apt to point out disagreement with the woman in distress. White women, on the other hand, while uplifting the woman and derogating the male romantic partner, tended to follow up their derogation by providing support for both the woman and the male romantic partner. The qualitative results suggest that the nuances in Black women's communication style could influence the way in which they talk about the partners' negative behaviour.

Friend support and intergroup delineation

The research on social support in friendships and its impact on romantic relationship quality is inconsistent. Earlier studies suggest that social groups benefit the relationship (e.g., Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992) whereas recent research posits they can harm the relationship (Mueller, 2006). The current study provides additional evidence that friends can serve as conflict multipliers rather than conflict buffers when talking about a male romantic partner. Scholars have yet to pinpoint the theoretical explanation for this counterintuitive finding, but one possible explanation could emerge from the intergroup literature. Julien and Markman (2006) speculate that "the establishment of outside bonds through self-disclosure of marital crises may be double edged. In the short-term perspective, competing affiliations may contribute to reducing attachment between partners (and) maintaining conflict" (p. 565). These researchers suggest that strengthening bonds outside of the romantic relationship can decrease closeness with the male partner. Other researchers suggest that women friends may feel obligated to help alleviate the relational issue while supporting the friend during her moment of distress (e.g., Wilson, Roloff, & Carey, 1998). That is, friends may feel compelled to act on behalf of their friend during a supportive encounter because they are most concerned about the woman's well-being. While the research has implicitly suggested potential intergroup explanations for why friendship groups could act as conflict multipliers in romantic relationships, the current study provides a theoretical explanation for this counter intuitive finding. The literature suggests that conversations about relational issues among friends can strengthen the gendered tie and when the man is identified as a target, the friend group shows allegiance to the woman rather than the partner. These discussions allude to the idea that intergroup delineations are established during the social support process among friendship circles. The quantitative findings of the current study support this idea by demonstrating that frequent communication among a group of friends could ignite an intergroup delineation process, such that the friend group negatively characterizes the male partner and his behaviour when discussing the conflict as a collective. Hence the significant associations among frequent communication among the friend group, derogation of the male partner, and decreased closeness between partners.

It comes as a surprise that the process of intergroup delineation is comparable for Black and White women when discussing a conflict regarding a male romantic partner. It could be that the urge to assist a friend during times of trouble is a *human response*, wherein cultural differences are less significant. As tend and befriend theory (Taylor et al.,

2000) suggests, women are physiologically motivated to affiliate with other women under conditions of stress. Both men and women experience stress-regulatory benefits when seeking social support from others, however women disproportionately seek such contact, and the stress-reducing benefits are more consistent when the support provider is a woman. This means Black and White women may foster and nurture ingroup bonds similarly. Despite the nonsignificant interactions with ethnicity, the study empirically supports that ingroup bonds may prompt outgroup derogation, and provides a theoretical explanation for decreased relational closeness.

Uplifting the friend and derogating the partner

The qualitative findings for this study reveal that the friends often resorted to derogating the male romantic partner as a means of providing good support to the woman. It seems as though both Black and White friend groups, at a minimum, criticized the partner's negative behaviour in order to reduce the stress of the conflict and uplift the woman in her time of need. This finding is worth noting because it undermines what constitutes "good support" according to traditional social support research (see Burleson, 1985, 2008, 2009; Burleson & Samter, 1985; Goldsmith, 1994). It is generally understood that lower person-centered messages (denying the other's feelings and perceptions by challenging their legitimacy) and moderately person-centered messages (implicitly recognizing the other's feelings by presenting explanations of the situation that are intended to reduce the other's distress) do a poor job of improving the emotional states of recipients compared to high person-centered messages (explicitly recognizing and legitimizing the other's feelings by helping them articulate those feelings) (Burleson, 2009). According to Burleson's (1985) theory of message person centeredness, minimizing the issue, distracting the friend by derogating the partner, and providing explanations for the situation by criticizing the romantic partners' behaviour are considered non-supportive. However our qualitative findings suggest otherwise. Though person-centeredness was not directly tested in this study, the results loosely illustrate that both Black and White women used more moderate and low person-centered messages to comfort their friend about the distressing conflict. This means that good friends might assist their friend in distress by embracing unconventional support strategies.

Future research should consider re-conceptualizing what constitutes "good support" to encompass situations where minimizing the issue, derogating a target, and illegitimizing feelings are necessary and potentially effective. Social support research also needs to better address the context of the support and where the support is coming from (i.e., the support provider). If these types of "lower person-centered messages" were coming from an acquaintance, they probably would be perceived as negative support. When they are communicated in the context of women friends, particularly a group of close friends, they may be perceived as uplifting and affirmative rather than as unsupportive. Both Black women and White women derogated the male romantic partner and it appeared to be a natural part of their conversations when the male partner did something to upset the woman.

Black Women as direct social supporters

A number of ethnic differences surfaced in the qualitative results of this study that require further attention and discussion. First, Black friends were comfortable taking a firm position on the conflict. Their messages of support could easily be classified as lower person-centered, as many had no difficulty criticizing and challenging the legitimacy of their friend's position on the argument. In fact, a few Black women groups told the woman that she was wrong and offered suggestions for remedying the problem. Along a similar line, Black participants reported that their friends were more apt to suggest termination of the relationship. Unlike White women who seemed to have a positive outlook on the relationship and offered a balanced perspective, Black friends provided very honest and direct support in favour of either person: sometimes Black women supported the woman and sometimes they told the woman that she was wrong. However, in both instances friend groups were direct about their one-sided opinions. Not only were the support messages different, but there was also a difference in the way Black friends delivered the messages. Black women seemed to embrace a unique linguistic style characterized by the use of stigmatized vocabulary that strung together effortlessly. It is quite possible that the "verbal agility" and "creative cadence" (Speicher & McMahon, 1992) inherent in Black American women's speech style significantly shaped the way in which support was constructed, delivered, and received among a group of Black women friends.

Previous research posits that friendship is a voluntary, non-institutionalized relationship with very low levels of conflict. With no legal or institutional mechanism to bond friends together (Rawlins, 1992), the research suggests that individuals are taught to stifle direct expressions of conflict because conflict could threaten the friendship. However, this assertion disregards the relational experiences of Black women, seeing that friends are considered family, or fictive kin, in the Black community. Black women *value* authentic, genuine, and open channels of communication with their Black friends, and are comfortable sending and receiving honest messages from others (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993). Certainly findings from this study contradict some of the mainstream notions of friendship that are, arguably, based upon White women's experiences. This study contends that Black communication norms distinguish the nature of friendship and the support process as unique among Black friend groups.

Concluding remarks

While there are numerous theoretical and practical implications from this study, they must be set within their limitations. The most noteworthy limitation of the current investigation is that the sample was comprised of primarily college-educated women. Future research should test this phenomenon among less educated Black and White women to see if sampling women with various education backgrounds creates a different social support experience. It is also possible that married women and older women are less disclosive of their relationship issues and may not initiate such discussions with their close women friends. Similarly, women of older generations may be less prone to share personal information because they were not raised in a technological era where personal information is readily available on the Internet. Future research should also examine if the group social support process examined in the current study is unique to women. For example, do men friend groups make intergroup delineations about women romantic partners during a

support conversation? A final limitation to the study is that the participants did not report their perceived closeness before the support conversation. A future study should collect data that measures the women's closeness with their partner before the conversation, immediately after the conversation, and a few days after the conversation. This longitudinal data could more accurately capture the effect of the support messages on the romantic relationship. Taken together, future research should discern whether this social support process is a gendered, dating, or generational phenomenon, as well as study its effect overtime. Nevertheless, the current study adds complexity to the idea that all women friend groups can harm, rather than help, one's romantic relationship. In particular, it provides a more nuanced understanding of how collective *groups* of people with different ethnicities undergo the social support process.

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