

Study explores connections between romantic relationships, health

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(Medical Xpress)—Having a supportive, committed partner in a relationship is beneficial for health no matter whether the status of the couple is dating, living together or married, according to a new study from University of Georgia sociologists.

Published in the *Journal of Family Psychology* in August, the research explores the connection between [romantic relationships](#) and health.

Using data from primarily African-American couples, the researchers' significant findings include support for the importance of positive partner behavior in predicting health. The study also found that interracial couples—whether dating, cohabiting or married—tend to report worse health than monoracial couples.

"There is a great body of research that says romantic relationship quality matters, though much of that research is on married couples," said Ashley Barr, a recent doctoral graduate in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences department of sociology and lead author on the study. "We approached the question from a different angle, asking how romantic relationships, in their varied forms, matter for young people in the transition to adulthood."

The study used data from the Family and Community Health Study, a UGA research project in operation since 1995. The results—on the importance of quality in the relationship no matter the status—matched the researchers' hypotheses. They also found that having a hostile partner—being in a low-quality relationship—was more disadvantageous in cohabiting or married relationships.

"Quite a bit of research, including other work using data from the Family and Community Health Study, suggests that being in a low-quality marital relationship is actually more detrimental than not being in a relationship at all," said Barr, now an assistant professor at the State University of New York, Buffalo.

Demographic patterns in the U.S. reflect decreasing marriage rates among African-Americans. In this context, one positive outcome from the new research suggests that having a good relationship is beneficial for health, no matter whether it is a dating, cohabiting or marital relationship.

"If we can build on those strengths-increasing relationship quality, no matter the form the relationship takes-that could potentially be beneficial for health," Barr said.

The study's authors also replicated some past research on the importance of quality with a new emphasis on young African-American couples to determine how shared relationship characteristics, being in an interracial relationship or the status itself affect mental and physical health. The results show that couples involved in interracial relationships reported worse health on average.

"This result was not due at all to lower quality of these relationships, because when we controlled for how the partners treated one another, that effect of being in an interracial [relationship](#) didn't go away," Barr said.

The authors hypothesize that part of this result can be explained by the phenomenon of micro-aggressions that interracial couples experience on a daily basis, including, Barr said, "things like running into an old friend or even a stranger and that person being surprised by your romantic partner because they're of a different race than you, or having the status of your children questioned because they are of a different race."

These incidents, which on the surface may not appear to be insults, add up on a daily basis and are thought to affect [health](#) adversely by enhancing stress.

"Linda Burton, a prominent family sociologist, has referred to the status and the acceptance of interracial couples, particularly black/white couples, as the bellwether of racial relations and racial equality," said study co-author Ronald Simons, a distinguished research professor in the department of sociology and principal investigator on the Family and Community Health Study. "As a society, we have been making gains, but

we still see disadvantages and racial inequality, which is expressed and felt by these interracial couples."

More information: "A dyadic analysis of relationships and health: Does couple-level context condition partner effects?" Barr AB, Simons RL. *J Fam Psychol*. 2014 Aug;28(4):448-59. [DOI: 10.1037/a0037310](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037310).

Provided by University of Georgia

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