SOCIAL NETWORKS IN RESEARCH ON AGING, RACE, AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

Alyssa Goldman
Department of Sociology
Boston College

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SOCIAL NETWORKS?

**Egocentric social network**
- An focal individual (“ego”), their social ties (“alters”), and the ties among their alters
- Also “personal social network”

**Sociocentric social network**
- All actual or potential ties among individuals in a particular social group (e.g., a high school, a community center)
- Also “global” or “whole-network”

“a set of actors and the ties among them”
-Wasserman and Faust, 1994
SOCIAL NETWORKS AND HEALTH

**Egocentric social network**
- Access to social resources, social support, social integration
- Coordination/oversight
- Social norms
- Direct source of information, advice, influence

**Sociocentric social network**
- Contagion
- Broader patterns of diffusion, influence in a community
- Embeddedness, constraint, cohesion

Youm et al. 2015
Social network characteristics:
- Size
- Composition; diversity
- Density; embeddedness
- Frequency of interaction
- Emotional closeness
- Multiplexity
- Mode of communication
- Length of relationship
- Geographic proximity
- Homophily

Social networks profoundly influence older adults’ health and well-being.
- Mortality; morbidity; cognition; functional health; depression; self-rated health; physiological functioning; health behaviors
SOCIAL NETWORKS, AGING, AND HEALTH

Life course transitions, for example:

- Retirement
- Geographic mobility
- Grandparenthood
- Caregiving
- Re-partnering
- Widowhood
- Health declines
- Death of alters

• Over a 5-year period, the majority of older adults experience at least one network loss and one network addition.

Cornwell, Goldman, and Laumann, 2020, *The Journals of Gerontology Series B*
Social network changes are associated with changes in:

- Functional health
- Self-rated health
- Depression
- Emotional well-being

(Cornwell and Laumann 2015; Bookwala 2016; Schwartz and Litwin 2017, 2019; Badaway et al., 2019)

Cornwell, Goldman, and Laumann, 2020, *The Journals of Gerontology Series B*

- Over a 5-year period, the majority of older adults experience at least one network loss and one network addition.
SOCIAL NETWORKS, AGING, AND RACIAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

Social networks

Differences in social networks between social groups, including racial/ethnic groups

Physical, mental, emotional health
  - Morbidity
  - Mortality
Social Networks and Health Disparities

Goldman and Cornwell 2018, Journal of Marriage and Family

- Significant differences across racial/ethnic groups in older adults’ network size, frequency of accessing network members, kin-centricity (e.g., Ajrouch et al. 2001; Small 2007; Alwin et al., 2018)

- Black older adults have higher levels of social network turnover compared to White older adults, including higher rates of network losses due to death (Cornwell 2015)

Given the link between social networks and health, how do these patterns shape health disparities?

- Social network differences between racial/ethnic groups may intensify health inequalities (Gauthier et al., 2021)
SOCIAL NETWORKS, AGING, AND RACIAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

Social networks

Physical, mental, emotional health
- Morbidity
- Mortality

Differences in social networks between racial/ethnic groups

Racial/ethnic health disparities

Social structure and environment
(e.g., systemic, political, legal institutional, socioeconomic, neighborhood, community)
SOCIAL NETWORKS, AGING, AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

**Neighborhood Concentrated Disadvantage**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Kin</th>
<th>First quarter (ref)</th>
<th>Second quarter</th>
<th>Third quarter</th>
<th>Fourth quarter</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predicted number of network members lost</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1.09</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Kin</th>
<th>First quarter (ref)</th>
<th>Second quarter</th>
<th>Third quarter</th>
<th>Fourth quarter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predicted number of network members lost</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.53</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
SOCIAL NETWORKS, AGING, AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

• How do racial discrimination and racism shape social networks?
  • Network turnover?
  • Changes in social network composition?

• Social networks as a potential moderator:
  • Buffering, protective effect
  • Social support
  • Social strain

Racial discrimination
Racism

Social networks

Racial disparities in health
How do experiences and exposures across the life course shape the social networks individuals have when entering later life?

Linked lives: events, experiences, or exposures that directly affect an individual can also affect their social network ties (Gee et al., 2012; Elder et al., 2003; Berkman et al., 2000)

What are the effects of an individual’s experiences of racism on the health and well-being of their social network members? (Gee et al., 2012)
FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

- How does racial inequality across the life course shape later life networks, in ways that may contribute to health inequalities? (Alwin et al. 2018)

- How are between-group differences in social network characteristics affected by racism and institutional forms of social and economic exclusion?

- What is the role of social networks in buffering or exacerbating the well-established associations between exposure to discrimination and health across the life course?
THANK YOU!

Alyssa Goldman, PhD
Boston College
Department of Sociology
alyssa.goldman@bc.edu

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