

## **Cultural Specificity of Support Sources, Correlates and Contexts: Three Studies of African-American and Caucasian Youth<sup>1</sup>**

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*Levels and correlates of parental support, peer support, partner support, and/or spiritual support among African American and Caucasian youth were examined in three contexts: adolescent pregnancy (Study 1), first year of college (Study 2), and adolescence and young adulthood (ages 15–29; Study 3). Partially consistent with a cultural specificity perspective, in different contexts different support sources were higher in level and/or more strongly related to adjustment for one ethnic group than the other. Among pregnant adolescents, levels of spiritual support were higher for African Americans than Caucasians; additionally, peer support was positively related to well-being only for African Americans whereas partner support was positively related to well-being only for Caucasians. Among college freshmen, family support was more strongly*

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*related to institutional and goal commitment for African Americans than Caucasians; conversely, peer support was more strongly related to institutional and goal commitment among Caucasians. Among 15 to 29-year-olds, levels of parental support and spiritual support were higher among African Americans than Caucasians; additionally, spiritual support was positively related to self-esteem for African Americans but not for Caucasians. Implications and limitations of the research are discussed.*

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**KEY WORDS:** support sources; African American youth; Caucasian youth; culture.

Although social support has occupied an increasingly important place in research on well-being in recent decades, relatively few studies have focused on ethnic differences in levels and sources of support, especially among adolescents and young adults (Vaux, 1988). Nor has much research focused on ethnic group differences in the nature of the relationship between support and adjustment. A cultural specificity perspective on ethnic group differences in support is adopted in the current paper. Such a perspective takes as given that ethnic groups will have differing cultural norms, experiences, and world views, and thus may differ in the meanings attributed to various life circumstances and in the importance of different social support sources (cf. Betancourt & López, 1993; Broman, Hamilton, Hoffman, & Mavaddat, 1994; Golding & Baezconde-Garbanati, 1990; Liang & Bogat, 1994; Mirowsky & Ross, 1980; Vaux, 1988; Vega, 1992; Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1995).

The support sources examined in this research include parents, friends, partners, and spiritual support. Primary research questions focus on ethnic group differences in levels of support from these varying sources and on differences across ethnic cultures in the relationship between support from various sources and either psychological well-being or academic adjustment (i.e., correlates of support). The psychological well-being variables examined include depression symptoms and self-esteem, each of which has been a focus of adolescent adjustment research in both Caucasian and African American samples (e.g., Gore & Aseltine, 1995; Hammond & Romeny, 1995; Luster & McAdoo, 1995; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Verkutyn, 1994). The cultural framework proposed encompasses ethnic culture differences both in the meaning of specific life events and in specific support sources as historic cultural resources for coping with daily living.

### *Cultural Meaning of Specific Life Events*

Research suggests that people interpret life events in different ways. Ethnic groups, in particular, may differ in whether a given type of life event

or situation (e.g., teenage pregnancy) is culturally accepted or valued (cf. Mirowski & Ross, 1980; Mutran, 1985; Ulbrich & Bradsher, 1993). The more culturally acceptable a life event is for a given ethnic group, the more support can be expected to be forthcoming from various support sources. That is, the individuals may not be stigmatized and isolated but may actually find themselves surrounded by similar others who can offer support.

Furthermore, when support from a given support source has greater value, is more appropriate, or has higher efficacy in one ethnic culture than another for a given life situation, support from that source will be more strongly related to adjustment in that culture than the other. This relationship is similar to the type of matching hypothesis that currently exists in the social support literature. Several researchers have noted that social support facilitates adjustment when there is a close relationship between the type of stressor, the type of support offered, and the source of support (see S. Cohen & Wills, 1985; Gore & Aseltine, 1995; Jackson, 1992; Tetzloff & Barrera, 1987). Similarly, we argue that culture both defines the meaning of an event and helps determine the appropriate source and type of support to be allocated. Specifically, we suggest a number of different pathways or conditions that alone, or in combination, may lead to cultural differences in the meaning or efficacy of a given support source.

A *source-meaning pathway* assumes that support sources may differ in the extent to which they have special, culturally imbued meaning for a given life event or situation, across ethnic cultures (Ulbrich & Bradsher, 1993). When a specific support source is viewed as a primary way of coping with, resolving or providing meaning to a given life event or situation in one culture but not another, support from that specific source can be expected to be more strongly related to well-being in the culture. For instance, partners may be a primary, culturally designated source of support for Caucasian pregnant teens, whereas support from parents and peers may be especially significant for African American pregnant teens (cf. Furstenberg, 1989; Paykel, Emms, Fletcher, & Rassaby, 1980).

Furthermore, one support source (e.g., parents) may hold discrepant views about an event from other support sources (e.g., peers, partners) within an ethnic group. In this *source-discrepancy pathway*, support from the sole positive source within a generally disapproving culture will carry greater weight than support from this same source in an ethnic culture in which most other support sources also hold positive views. That is, support from the sole positive source within an ethnic culture will be especially critical for well-being since support from the other, culturally disapproving sources will in general be less available or less appropriate and helpful.

Finally, differential acceptability or value attributed to life situations, along with other factors, may lead to a differential frequency of occurrence

of various life events across ethnic groups. When a life event or circumstance is more frequent in one ethnic group than another, peers able to provide event-specific understanding and event-appropriate help will more likely be available (cf. Brim & Ryff, 1980). As a result, mutual-help-based processes such as not feeling alone, and opportunities to contribute as well as receive support, will be more widespread. Due to the importance for well-being of mutual-help processes (cf. Riessman, 1990), in this *events-frequency pathway* the relationship between peer support and adjustment is expected to be stronger in the ethnic group in which the given life event or circumstance is more frequent.

### *Support Sources as Historic Cultural Resources*

Among ethnic cultures historically lacking power or status in society, it is assumed that particular support sources (e.g., extended family, spiritual support) develop through historical experience and cultural tradition as primary, designated resources for adapting to daily life. In terms of *support levels* in daily life, support from these sources can generally be expected to be higher for the ethnic group whose cultural tradition places special value on them. Furthermore, in terms of *correlates of support*, a stronger relationship between support from these sources and well-being can be expected for the ethnic group for whom these sources are historic cultural resources. Specifically, the culturally based resource should be especially capable and appropriate for partially counteracting feelings of social powerlessness or discrimination experienced in daily life.

There may be some specific life events or situations for which the usual availability or contribution of historic resources for members of a cultural group are diminished or counteracted due to the event-specific cultural meanings (see previous section) assigned to that particular life situation (e.g., sexual orientation). In general, however, historic cultural resources can be expected to be especially available and efficacious for both diverse population samples of an ethnic culture, and for subsamples facing a specific life event or situation. Thus, in the current research it is expected that historic cultural resources will be more available, and more strongly linked to adjustment, for both the life event-defined samples and for the more general population sample studied.

## THE CURRENT RESEARCH

The current research brings together three separate studies of African American and Caucasian youth, each of which included measures of youths'

support levels, sources, and adjustment correlates. Although the three studies were not initially designed to examine the cultural specificity framework outlined above, they do provide the opportunity to examine aspects of it. The first two studies focus on teen pregnancy and academic achievement, respectively. These represent life contexts which appear to have different meanings, at least for some support sources, among African Americans and Caucasians. Thus, these two studies provide the opportunity to examine the various life event-specific pathways noted above. The third study focuses on a general sample of adolescents and young adults in diverse life contexts. Since it does not focus on a particular life context, this study also represents a sort of "control" sample for the life event-focused emphasis of the first two studies. All three studies provide an opportunity for the examination of the historic cultural resources framework.

### *Cultural Specificity of Support in Pregnant Teens*

In the literature on adolescent pregnancy, a number of researchers have discussed differing culturally based responses to pregnancy in the African American and Caucasian communities (cf., Dore & Dumois, 1990; Furstenberg, 1989; Gabriel & McAnarney, 1983; Scott-Jones, Roland, & White, 1989). For example, due to a longer cultural history with diverse family constellations, a tradition of reciprocal obligation in the local community, fewer adult options perceived as viable, and less fear of the consequences of teenage pregnancy, African American families and peers may be more supportive of adolescent pregnancy than their Caucasian counterparts. Caucasian pregnant teens in contrast may feel more isolated and more likely be expected to marry and receive support from the biological father (Furstenberg, 1989; Gabriel & McAnarney, 1983; Scott-Jones et al., 1989; Teti & Lamb, 1989). Concerning empirical research, only three studies were found in which social support sources, levels, or correlates were directly compared for African American versus Caucasian pregnant or parenting teens.

Using generalized measures of social support (encompassing multiple support sources), one study found African American pregnant teens, teen mothers, and nonpregnant/nonparent teens in a Northwestern metropolitan region to have higher levels of support than their Caucasian counterparts (Bath, Schinke, & Maxwell, 1983). A second study found no differences in general levels of support between African American and Caucasian Midwestern adolescent mothers (Reis & Herz, 1987). Unfortunately, neither study examined ethnic differences in particular sources of support (e.g., parents, peers, partner), nor the extent of relationship between support and well-being for African Americans versus Caucasians. A third study did ex-

amine the link between support and well-being, the latter assessed by a general symptom checklist, but relied on single-item, dichotomous measures of support from various sources (Thompson, 1986). Although no differences in the extent of relationship between any support variable and well-being was found, the likely limited reliability and validity of single-item, dichotomous support measures preclude drawing any conclusions from this study.

The empirical research to date does not provide much guidance as to the likely nature and extent of cultural specificity of support among African American and Caucasian pregnant teens. However, based on the conceptual analyses of African American culture noted above, several hypotheses are generated. Parent support, consistent with the cultural meaning of events and the historic cultural resource frameworks, peer support (cultural meaning of events framework), and spiritual support (historic cultural resource framework) will be perceived as more available for African American in comparison to Caucasian pregnant teens. Furthermore, it is expected that parental support (source-meaning pathway and historic cultural resource framework) will be more critical for well-being, and partner support (source-meaning and source-discrepancy pathways) less critical, for African American than for Caucasian pregnant teens (see Table I, 1st column, for summary of predictions).

### *Cultural Specificity of Support in College Freshmen*

A number of researchers have suggested that African American peers may be less supportive of academic achievement than their Caucasian counterparts (cf. Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). This may be due to a culturally based view that succeeding academically is "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Although this likely is especially true in precollege populations, the social networks of college students, especially those who commute to or who attend college near their metropolitan area homes, may still include a higher proportion of peers who do not highly value academic achievement when compared to those of Caucasian students (although non-academic, global support from peers may be comparable). Furthermore, college entrance and graduation represent a proportionally higher frequency event among Caucasian youth (cf. Brown, Barram, Ehrlich, & Scarr, 1994), perhaps in part due to peer group norms about the value of academic achievement. Finally, some have suggested that for African American students high levels of parental support may be especially important to facilitate academic commitment, given many environmentally and ethnically based stressors. Such stressors include smaller numbers of available academically supportive peers, and more role conflicts between expectations of the ex-

Table I. Predicted Ethnicity and Support × Ethnicity Effects Across Three Studies<sup>a</sup>

	Pregnant teens	College freshmen	Adolescents and young adults
Predicted main effects for ethnicity			
Parent support	A-A > C <sup>CM, HCR</sup>	A-A > C <sup>HCR</sup>	A-A > C <sup>HCR</sup>
Peer support	A-A > C <sup>CM</sup>		
Spiritual support	A-A > C <sup>HCR</sup>	n/a	A-A > C <sup>HCR</sup>
Partner support		n/a	n/a
Predicted Support × Ethnicity interactions			
Parent support	A-A > C <sup>SM, HCR</sup>	A-A > C <sup>SM, SD, HCR</sup>	A-A > C <sup>HCR</sup>
Peer support	A-A > C <sup>SM, EF</sup>	C > A-A <sup>EF</sup>	
Spiritual support	A-A > C <sup>HCR</sup>	n/a	A-A > C <sup>HCR</sup>
Partner support	C > A-A <sup>SM, SD</sup>	n/a	n/a

<sup>a</sup>A-A = African American; C = Caucasian; n/a = variable not assessed; CM = cultural meaning framework; HCR = historic cultural resource; EF = event frequency pathway; SD = source discrepancy pathway; SM = source meaning pathway.

ternal black community and that of academic institutions (R. Clark, 1983; Prom-Jackson, Johnson, & Wallace, 1987; Tinto, 1987).

Concerning empirical research, only a handful of studies were found in which social support sources, levels, and academic achievement correlates were directly compared for African American versus Caucasian students. Studies of secondary school populations have found African Americans, in contrast to Caucasians, to report greater levels of perceived helpfulness of family (high schools students; Cauce, Felner, & Primavera, 1982), lower congruence of peer and family support concerning academic success (high school students; Steinberg et al., 1992), and more extensive neighborhood friendships but less contact with friends while in school (junior high students, Dubois & Hirsch, 1990). Studies of college students have found relatively few differences between blacks and whites using peer, family, or general support measures (Jay & D'Augelli, 1991; Mallinckrodt, 1988; Stewart & Vaux, 1986; Zea et al., 1995).

Taken together, the empirical research to date does not provide any consensus on the likely nature and extent of cultural specificity of support among African American and Caucasian students. However, based on the conceptual analyses of African American culture noted above, it is expected that family support is more critical for academic adjustment (source-meaning, source-discrepancy, and historic cultural resource pathways) and peer support less critical (event-frequency pathway), for African American in comparison to Caucasian students. In addition, higher levels of family support may be expected for African American than Caucasian freshmen (historic cultural resource). No prediction is made concerning ethnic group differences in levels of peer support, since it is not clear that differences in ethnic group valuing

of academic achievement affect overall (global) levels of peer support, and since previous research has not revealed ethnic group differences in peer support (see Table I, 2nd column, for summary of predictions).

### *Cultural Specificity of Support in Adolescents and Young Adults*

Consistent with the historic cultural resources perspective, certain support sources may be especially important for coping with daily life among ethnic youth in general population samples (i.e., youth both in and out of school, of different ages, and in different life contexts). Specifically, African American scholars note that connectedness to family (Billingsley, 1992; M. L. Clark, 1989; Wilson, 1989), and spirituality (Boykin, 1983; Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990; Taylor & Chatters, 1991) are support resources historically based in African culture, and historically important for helping African Americans cope with daily living in a society often viewed as hostile. Furthermore, empirical research in adult African American samples has underscored the importance of extended family (e.g., Dressler, 1980; Ellison, 1990; Jayakody, Chatters, & Taylor, 1993) and spiritual coping (e.g., Taylor & Chatters, 1991). However, no empirical studies were located that looked at ethnic group differences in such measures in a diverse sample of adolescents and young adults.

In the current research, measures of parental and spiritual support were available. Although no empirical research comparing levels or correlates of parental or spiritual support among general samples of African American and Caucasian adolescents and young adults was found, based on the historic cultural resources framework, it is expected that (a) parental and spiritual support will be perceived as more available (i.e., higher mean levels) for African American than Caucasian adolescents and young adults; and (b) parental and spiritual support will be more critical for well-being (i.e., more strongly related to well-being) for African American than Caucasian adolescents and young adults (see Table I, 3rd column, for summary of predictions).

## **STUDY 1: PREGNANT ADOLESCENTS**

### **Method**

#### *Research Participants*

From two urban teen mother clinics in Baltimore, 102 pregnant adolescents (59 African American, 43 Caucasian, mean age = 16.7 years) were



recruited as part of a larger study of adolescent parenthood. One clinic served an ethnically mixed population (16 African American, 41 Caucasian), and the other a predominantly African American population (43 African American, 2 Caucasian). Adolescents were included in the study if they were primiparous, at least 12 weeks pregnant, less than 18 years of age, and planning to keep their babies. The majority of those approached agreed to participate (about 85% at both clinics). Ten additional individuals recruited for the study who had missing data on primary study variables were not included in the current research.

### *Procedure*

Clinic staff identified adolescents who met selection criteria, and project interviewers asked the adolescents if they wished to participate in a study of how adolescents cope with pregnancy and parenthood. Interviewers were Caucasian graduate and advanced undergraduate students, and were trained to administer the protocol in a standardized manner, and to attempt to establish rapport at the start of the session by engaging in friendly conversation. Participants were assured of strict confidentiality and were informed that their health care from the clinic they attended was not in jeopardy if they declined to participate. Participants were interviewed at the clinic when they were in their second or third trimester of pregnancy (mean gestational age = 23.3 weeks). They were administered a questionnaire battery followed by a 45-minute interview that inquired in specific ways about their experiences with pregnancy. Interviewers read the questionnaire items to participants in almost all cases. The questionnaire battery and interview typically required 1–2 hours to complete. At the close of the sessions, participants were paid \$10.

The present study focused on selected questionnaire assessments that tapped adolescents' perceptions of support and well-being.

### *Social and Spiritual Support Measures*

Perceptions of social support from parents and from peers were assessed with shortened forms of Procidano and Heller's (1983) parent support and friend support scales. The shortened versions were derived by principal components analysis (Maton, Gouze, & Keating, 1987). The original true-false question format was changed so that all questions were answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all accurate*) to 5 (*completely accurate*). The parental social support scale consisted of 11

items. A sample item is: "I rely on my parents for emotional support." The peer support scale consisted of 10 items. A sample item is "I have a deep sharing relationship with a number of friends." Procidano and Heller (1983) reported adequate reliability and validity for the scales. In the current study, the alpha reliabilities for the parent support (.92 overall, .93 African American, .89 Caucasian) and peer support (.91 overall, .90 African American, .93 Caucasian) scales were adequate.

A partner social support scale was developed from a set of items included in the questionnaire to assess involvement with partner. Some items were generated by the research team, and others were from the marital relationship scale of Locke and Wallace (1959). Specifically, six items assessing perceptions of partner support were subjected to principal components analysis; four items achieved loadings above .40 on the first component and were used in the current study. These items assessed extent of confiding in partner, partner's interest in the adolescent's health, partner's interest in the baby's health, and overall satisfaction with the partner. Since the Likert-type response scales differed somewhat across items, each item was made into a z score, and the sum of the z scores constituted the Partner Support scale. The alpha reliabilities for the scale (.72 overall, .72 African American, .72 Caucasian) were adequate.

Adolescents were also asked to indicate the "most supportive person" in their life at present. Responses were coded into three categories: parent, opposite-sex partner, and other. The "other" category included small percentages of students who indicated either friends, siblings, extended family, or other adults (3–6% of the sample in each case).

Spiritual support was assessed with Maton's (1989) three-item scale. The three items are: "I experience God's love and caring on a regular basis"; "I experience a personal, close relationship with God"; and "My religious faith helps me to cope during times of difficulty." The measure has been found to be highly reliable and to relate in expected directions to well-being measures (Maton, 1989; Maton & Zimmerman, 1992). For the current study, the alpha reliabilities for the spiritual support scale were adequate (.87 overall, .84 African American, .84 Caucasian).

### *Well-Being*

Depression symptoms was assessed by the depression scale of the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Spencer, 1982). Individuals reported how distressed they were by each of seven symptoms (e.g., having thoughts of ending your life, feeling lonely) during the past week. This widely used measure has reported strong reliability and validity. For the

current study, the alpha reliabilities for the scale were adequate (.81 overall, .73 African American, .87 Caucasian).

Self-esteem was assessed by Rosenberg's (1979) self-esteem scale. The scale contains 10 items, 5 positively and 5 negatively worded. This instrument has been widely used and has reported reliability and validity. For the current study, the alpha reliabilities for the self-esteem scale were adequate (.80 overall, .73 African American, .86 Caucasian).

### *Demographic Measures*

Demographic information was obtained at the start of the research session. Socioeconomic status (SES) was calculated using Hollingshead's (1975) four-factor index, based on each parent's occupational status and educational level. In cases where one or more of the four indicators were absent, the value of the most comparable indicator available from the individual was substituted.

## **Results**

### *Preliminary Analyses*

The African American and Caucasian samples did not differ significantly in age ( $M = 16.6$  and  $16.8$ , respectively), having a current opposite-sex relationship (88.9 and 76.2%), currently living at home (89.8 and 79.1%), currently having a romantic relationship with the child's father (72.9 and 73.2%), or SES (27.9 and 29.0). The SES scores place both groups in the second lowest of the five Hollingshead (1975) social strata.

The African American sample had been pregnant somewhat longer (25.0 weeks) than the Caucasian sample (20.9 weeks),  $t = 2.7$ ,  $p < .01$ , were less likely to be married (0 vs. 11.6%),  $\chi^2(1) = 7.2$ ,  $p < .01$ , and were more likely to have remained enrolled in school (71.2 vs. 41.9%),  $\chi^2(1) = 8.8$ ,  $p < .01$ . As a general analytic strategy (across studies), covariates employed in multivariate analyses included (a) all background variables on which African Americans and Caucasians differed significantly, and (b) independent of significant differences, the three primary demographic variables of SES, gender (as applicable), and age.

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), with age, SES, number of weeks pregnant, marital status, and current school status as covariates, indicated that African Americans did not differ in depression or self-esteem from Caucasians. (Without covariates, a  $t$ -test analysis did reveal significantly greater self-esteem for blacks,  $t = 2.2$ ,  $p < .05$ .)

Intercorrelations among all demographic, support, and well-being variables are shown in the Appendix, Table AI, for blacks and whites separately.

### *Primary Analyses*

*Differences in Support Levels and Most Supportive Person.* To examine ethnic group differences in support levels, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), with age, SES, number of weeks pregnant, marital status, and current school status as covariates, was performed on the support variables. A significant difference between African Americans and Caucasians was obtained, multivariate  $F(3, 93) = 7.9, p < .01$  (Table II). The univariate  $F$ s indicated that African Americans reported higher levels of spiritual support ( $M = 11.6$ ) than did Caucasians ( $M = 8.1$ ),  $F(1, 95) = 23.0, p < .01$ . There were no significant differences for parent support ( $M$ s = 41.8 and 38.5, respectively) or peer support ( $M$ s = 37.5 and 33.7). In a second MANCOVA limited to the subsample with partners and including partner support along with the other support variables, no significant ethnicity differences were found for partner support ( $M$ s = -0.1 and -0.3, respectively).

To examine ethnic group differences in who was reported as most supportive person, a chi-square analysis was performed. The analysis was not significant. A majority of both African Americans and Caucasians indicated that a parent was their most supportive person (55.9 and 60.5%, respectively), with fewer indicating an opposite-sex partner (27.1 and 20.9%) or some other person (16.9 and 18.6%) (Table II).

*Relationship of Support to Well-Being.* To examine ethnic group differences in the relationship between support and well-being, hierarchical regression analyses were performed for the depression symptoms and self-esteem criterion variables. Six demographic and background variables (age, SES, weeks pregnant, in school, marital status, ethnicity) were entered first, followed by the three support variables, and then, in separate steps, the Ethnicity  $\times$  Parent Support, the Ethnicity  $\times$  Peer Support, and the Ethnicity  $\times$  Spiritual Support interactions. The same analysis was repeated a second time, including partner support as a fourth support variable, for the subsample with partners. Since the findings in the latter analysis were essentially the same as those in the former (with one exception, noted below), only the findings for the subsample with partners is reported (Table III). For depression, the demographics together explained a nonsignificant 4.0% of variance for the subsample with partners ( $n = 88$ ). The four support variables explained a significant 11.6% of variance,  $p < .05$ , with only parent support making a significant contribution,

**Table II.** Means and Percentages on Support Variables for African American and Caucasian Pregnant Adolescents

Variable	African American			Caucasian		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Parent support	41.8	11.4	58	38.5	9.5	43
Peer support	37.5	8.7	59	33.7	9.4	43
Spiritual support	11.6 <sup>a</sup>	3.4	59	8.1	3.6	43
Partner support	-0.1	3.0	52	-0.3	2.8	36
	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>		<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	
Most supportive person:						
Parent	55.9	33		60.5	26	
Opposite-sex partner	27.1	16		20.9	9	
Other	16.9	10		18.6	8	

<sup>a</sup>*p* < .01.

$\beta = -.27, p < .01$ . Both the Ethnicity  $\times$  Peer Support,  $R^2$ -change = .053,  $\beta = -.87, p < .05$ , and the Ethnicity  $\times$  Partner Support,  $R^2$ -change = .109,  $\beta = 1.24, p < .01$ , interactions were significant. Figure 1A displays the Ethnicity  $\times$  Peer Support interaction on depression symptoms, and Figure 1B displays the Ethnicity  $\times$  Partner Support interaction (cf. J. Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Peer support was inversely related to depression for African Americans and positively related for Caucasians (Figure 1A). In contrast, partner support was inversely related to depression symptoms for whites and positively (though modestly) related for blacks (Figure 1B). For self-esteem, the demographics together explained a nonsignificant 5.7% of variance for the subsample with partners ( $n = 88$ ). The four support variables explained a nonsignificant 7.2% of variance. The Ethnicity  $\times$  Partner Support interaction was again significant,  $R^2$ -change = .069,  $\beta = -.99, p < .01$  (same interaction patterns as for depression symptoms). The Ethnicity  $\times$  Peer Support interaction was not significant; however, the Ethnicity  $\times$  Peer Support interaction was significant for the full sample analysis ( $N = 102$ ), explaining 5.1% of variance,  $\beta = .80, p < .05$  (same interaction pattern as for depression symptoms).

## Discussion

### *Differences in Support Levels*

According to the cultural meaning of events framework, individuals experiencing life events which are more accepted or valued within a culture should receive greater levels of support, from diverse support sources. How-

**Table III.** Multiple Regression Results for Depression Symptoms and Self-Esteem for African American and Caucasian Pregnant Adolescents Subsample with Partners ( $N = 88$ )

Step	Depression symptoms			Self-esteem		
	Entry $\beta$	$R^2$ -change	Correlation	Entry $\beta$	$R^2$ -change	Correlation
1. Demographics		.040			.057	
Age	.08		.10	.06		.00
SES	-.02		-.01	.01		.02
Weeks pregnant	-.01		-.06	.11		.16
In school	-.02		.06	-.08		-.10
Married	.11		.15	-.09		-.14
Ethnicity (A-A)	-.11		-.15	.10		.18
2. Support		.116 <sup>a</sup>			.072	
Parent	-.27 <sup>b</sup>		-.32 <sup>b</sup>	.13		.22 <sup>a</sup>
Peer	-.05		-.15	.18		.22 <sup>a</sup>
Partner	-.19		-.19	.13		.11
Spiritual	.08		-.04	-.02		.09
3. Ethnicity X Parent	-.23	.001		-.14	.000	
4. Ethnicity X Peer	-.87 <sup>a</sup>	.053 <sup>a</sup>		.59	.025	
5. Ethnicity X Partner	1.24 <sup>b</sup>	.109 <sup>b</sup>		-.99 <sup>b</sup>	.069 <sup>b</sup>	
6. Ethnicity X Spiritual	.06	.000		.06	.000	

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ .<sup>b</sup> $p < .01$ .

ever, African American pregnant teens, when compared to Caucasians, did not report higher levels of parental or peer support with marital status statistically controlled. The two ethnic groups also did not differ in levels of partner support, or in who was indicated as most supportive person.

Consistent with the historic cultural resource framework, African American pregnant teens reported higher levels of spiritual support than Caucasian teens. However, contrary to this framework, the African American sample did not report higher levels of parent support.

### *Relationship of Support to Well-Being*

Consistent with the cultural meaning of events framework, source-meaning, and event-frequency pathways, among pregnant teens peer support was inversely related to depression symptoms only for African Americans. Peer support for black pregnant teens may be perceived as more culturally normative and expected, that is, its meaning may differ for African Americans than Caucasians (Furstenberg, 1989; Gabriel &

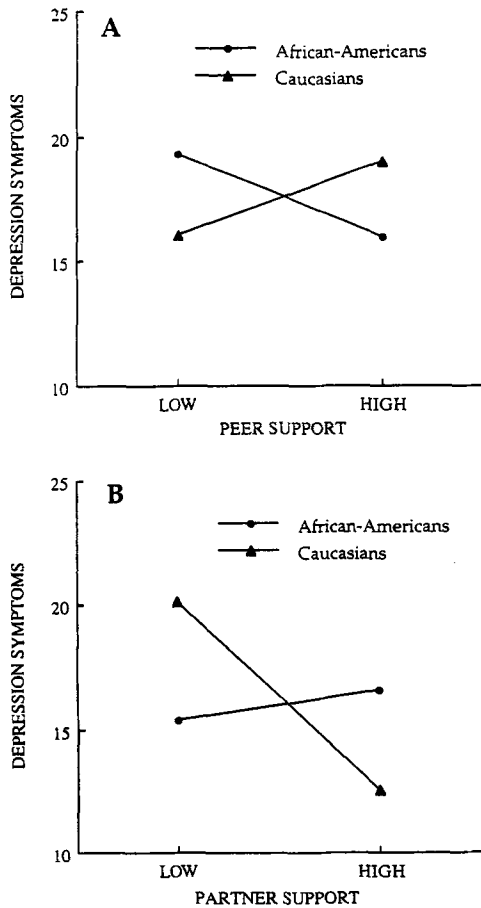


Fig. 1. A. Peer support by ethnicity; B. Partner support by ethnicity.

McAnarney, 1983; Scott-Jones et al., 1989). As a result, its absence may be especially deleterious for blacks' well-being. Such support may also be more specifically tailored to pregnancy-related issues and more often involve mutual-help processes among African Americans, since a greater proportion of black than white peers experience this life event. It is not clear, however, why for Caucasians peer support would be linked to greater symptoms, as the two variables were not related at the zero-order level.

Also consistent with the cultural meaning of events framework, source-meaning and source-discrepancy pathways, among pregnant teens partner support was inversely related to depression symptoms only for Caucasians. Failure to receive partner support may have a greater, negative impact on well-being for Caucasians, given the cultural value placed on such support. That is, support from a partner may be more critical or meaningful because the partner is more likely viewed as a current or future marital partner. It is not clear why partner support would be linked to greater symptoms for African Americans, as the two variables were not significantly related at the zero-order level.

Contrary to the historic cultural resource framework, neither parent support nor spiritual support were differentially related to well-being across the two ethnic groups.

Study 2 presents an opportunity to further examine the cultural specificity of support in a very different life context than teen pregnancy.

## STUDY 2: COLLEGE FRESHMAN

### Method

#### *Research Participants*

The research participants were drawn from the 1990 freshman class at a medium-size university on the East Coast, located just outside a large city. Surveys were sent to all 164 African American students, and to 343 Caucasian students (50% random sample, stratified to achieve the same on-campus/off-campus ratio as for the African American students). Of the 507 surveys sent, 351 were returned (68% overall return rate, 64% African American, 72% Caucasian). As part of the larger, prospective study design, 69 students were excluded from the study who had not completed a prior research questionnaire administered to all freshmen attending university summer orientation sessions. Students were also excluded if they were missing data on primary study variables ( $n = 9$ ), or were 20 years or older ( $n = 4$ ). The final sample comprised 79 African American students and 190 Caucasian students.

#### *Procedure*

An eight-page questionnaire was mailed early in the Spring semester of the freshmen year with a cover letter explaining the research project,



and providing instructions and a self-addressed stamped envelope. The cover letter was printed on official Freshmen Year Experience letterhead (a university office focused on aiding freshmen) and cosigned by both the university executive vice-president and the assistant provost. Students were informed that they would be eligible for a \$200 lottery prize if they returned the survey within the first week, and a \$150 lottery prize if they returned it after that point. Follow-up letters, phone calls, and a second complete mailing were made to nonresponders.

### *Social Support Measures*

Perceived social support from peers was assessed with the same measure as in Study 1. The scale used to assess parental support in Study 1 was modified, with the term "parents" replaced by "family" throughout, to expand beyond a sole focus on parental support. To keep the mailed survey as brief as possible, the partner support, spiritual support, and most supportive person measures were not included. The alpha reliabilities for the family support (.94 overall, .93 African American, .95 Caucasian) and peer support (.88 overall, .88 African American, .87 Caucasian) scales were adequate.

### *Academic Adjustment Measures*

Grade point average (GPA) and academic commitment were the two academic adjustment measures assessed. So that the GPA criterion measure would not temporally precede, in part, the social support predictor variables, spring semester GPA, rather than freshman year GPA, was selected as the criterion measure. The GPA measure was obtained from institutional records. The six-item Institutional and Goal Commitment subscale of Pascarella and Terenzini's (1980) Academic and Social Integration Inventory was used as a measure of academic commitment. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Examples of items are: "It is important to me to graduate from college" and "Getting good grades is not important to me." The overall inventory has a reliability of .71, and several studies have reported predictive validity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1983). For the current sample, the scale's alpha reliability was adequate (.59 overall, .64 African American, .56 Caucasian). Its construct validity received some support from its significant inverse relationship with a questionnaire item used in previous research to assess dropout intention (Mallinckrodt, 1988), "I am certain that I will get my degree from [this university]" ( $r = -.52, p < .01$ , overall;  $r = -.54, p < .01$ , African American;  $r = -.50, p < .01$ , Caucasian).

### *Demographic Measures*

Demographic and background information were obtained from the research questionnaire (gender, age, ethnicity, parents' marital status, parents' SES, commuting status, intended major) and from the university's data base (high school GPA, SAT combined score). Major was coded using a slightly adapted form of the university's categorization system: Science (includes math, engineering, computer science), Social Science, Arts/Humanities, and Health (e.g., nursing, emergency health services). SES was calculated using Hollingshead's (1975) four-factor index, as in Study 1.

## **Results**

### *Preliminary Analyses*

The African American and Caucasian samples did not differ in age ( $M = 18.2$  and  $18.3$ , respectively), gender (67.1 and 64.2% female), or living on campus (70.9 and 74.2%). African Americans had lower high school GPA ( $M = 2.8$ ) than Caucasians ( $M = 3.0$ ),  $t = 3.3$ ,  $p < .01$ , lower SAT totals ( $M_s = 946.8$  and  $1020.3$ ),  $t = 4.1$ ,  $p < .01$ , less likely to have parents living together (55.7 and 74.2%),  $\chi^2(1) = 8.9$ ,  $p < .01$ , more likely to major in science (53.2 and 34.7%) than in arts/humanities (5.1 and 11.6%) or undecided (10.1 and 20.0%),  $\chi^2(4) = 11.1$ ,  $p < .05$ , and lower SES ( $M_s = 45.6$  and  $48.7$ ),  $t = 2.6$ ,  $p < .01$ . The SES scores place both groups in the second highest of the five Hollingshead (1975) social strata.

*T*-test analyses indicated that blacks achieved lower GPAs than whites,  $t = -4.3$ ,  $p < .01$ , and reported higher levels of institutional and goal commitment,  $t = 2.3$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, a MANCOVA, with gender, SES, parental marital status, high school GPA, SAT total, and major as covariates performed on the academic adjustment variables did not indicate a significant effect for ethnicity.

Intercorrelations among all demographic, support, and academic adjustment variables are shown in the Appendix, Table AII, for blacks and whites separately.

### *Primary Analyses*

*Differences in Support Levels.* To examine ethnic group differences in support levels, a MANCOVA with gender, SES, parental marital status, high school GPA, SAT total, and major as covariates was performed on

the social support variables. A significant difference between ethnic groups was not found (Table IV).

*Relationship of Support to Academic Adjustment.* To examine ethnicity differences in the relationship between support and academic adjustment, hierarchical regression analyses were performed for the two second-semester academic criterion variables ( $N = 269$ ). Demographic variables (gender, SES, high school GPA, parental marital status, SAT total, major, and ethnicity) were entered first, followed by the two second-semester support variables, and then, in separate steps, the Ethnicity  $\times$  Family Support and Ethnicity  $\times$  Peer Support interactions (Table V). For second-semester GPA, the demographics together explained a significant 31.2% of variance,  $p < .01$ . The two support variables explained a nonsignificant 1.4% of variance. Neither Ethnicity  $\times$  Support interaction was significant. For institutional and goal commitment, the demographics explained 22.9% of variance,  $p < .01$ . The two support variables explained a significant 2.5% of variance,  $p < .05$ . Peer support,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ , was positively related to commitment. The Ethnicity  $\times$  Family Support,  $R^2$ -change = 1.3,  $\beta = .44$ ,  $p < .05$ , and Ethnicity  $\times$  Peer Support,  $R^2$ -change = 1.8,  $\beta = -.76$ ,  $p < .05$ , interactions were both significant. Figure 2 displays the Ethnicity  $\times$  Family Support and Ethnicity  $\times$  Peer Support interactions. Family support was positively related to institutional and goal commitment for African Americans, but unrelated for Caucasians (Figure 2A). In contrast, peer support was positively related to institutional and goal commitment for Caucasians, and only slightly (negatively) related for African Americans (Figure 2B).

## Discussion

### *Differences in Support Levels.*

Consistent with previous research (Stewart & Vaux, 1986), there were no differences in levels of family or peer support among African American

**Table IV.** Means on Support Variables for African American and Caucasian College Freshmen<sup>a</sup>

Variable	African American ( $n = 79$ )		Caucasian ( $n = 190$ )	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Family support	38.6	10.4	38.7	10.7
Peer support	36.7	7.5	37.4	6.7

<sup>a</sup>There were no significant differences.

and Caucasian freshmen. Although no prediction had been made concerning differential levels of peer support, the historic cultural resource framework had predicted higher levels of family support for the African American students.

### *Relationship of Support to Adjustment*

Consistent with the cultural meaning of events framework, source meaning and source discrepancy pathways, and with the historic cultural resource framework, family support was positively related to institutional and goal commitment for African Americans but not for Caucasians. Given the various barriers African Americans face in predominantly white settings in pursuing academic success (e.g., R. Clark, 1983; Prom-Jackson et al., 1987), and less than full valuing of academic achievement among some African American peers (see below), it appears that high levels of support

**Table V.** Multiple Regression Results for GPA and Institutional and Goal Commitment for African American and Caucasian College Students

Step	Spring semester GPA			Institutional and goal commitment		
	Entry $\beta$	$R^2$ -change	Correlation	Entry $\beta$	$R^2$ -change	Correlation
1. Demographics		.312 <sup>b</sup>			.229 <sup>b</sup>	
Gender (female)	-.02		.03	.11		.12
SES	-.02		.08	.03		.00
Parents together	-.05		-.12	-.05		-.06
Ethnicity (A-A)	-.09		-.26 <sup>b</sup>	.10		.14 <sup>a</sup>
High school GPA	.35 <sup>b</sup>		.44 <sup>b</sup>	.07		.16 <sup>b</sup>
SAT	.21 <sup>b</sup>		.35 <sup>b</sup>	.04		.10
Lives on campus	.15 <sup>a</sup>		.18 <sup>b</sup>	.00		.05
Science major	-.19 <sup>a</sup>		-.11	.56 <sup>b</sup>		.24 <sup>b</sup>
Social sci. major	.07		.10	.44 <sup>b</sup>		.11
Health major	-.07		-.02	.30 <sup>b</sup>		.05
Arts/human. major	.05		.09	.23 <sup>b</sup>		-.05
2. Support		.014			.025 <sup>a</sup>	
Family	.11		.03	.10		.11
Peer	-.10		-.07	.12 <sup>a</sup>		.14 <sup>a</sup>
3. Ethnicity $\times$ Family	.09	.001		.44 <sup>a</sup>	.013 <sup>a</sup>	
4. Ethnicity $\times$ Peer	.10	.000		-.76 <sup>a</sup>	.018 <sup>a</sup>	

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup> $p < .01$ .

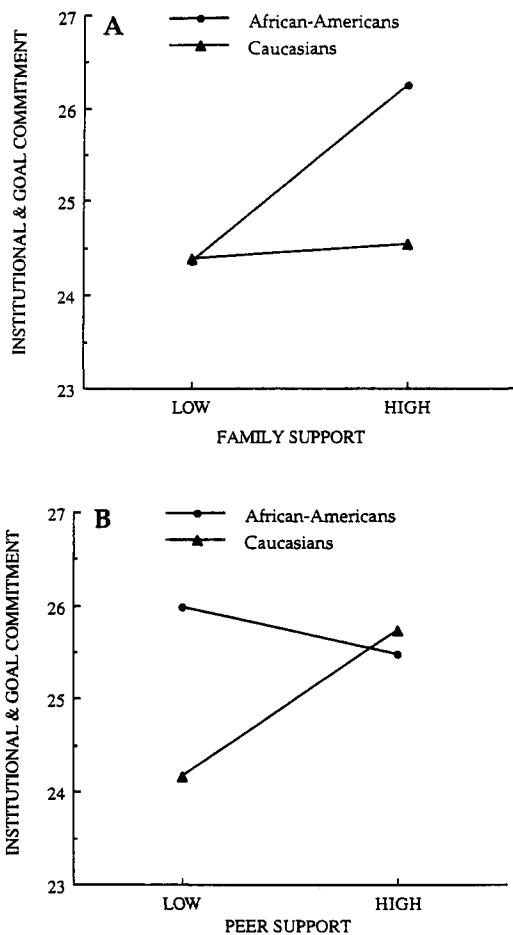


Fig. 2. A. Family support by ethnicity; B. peer support by ethnicity.

perceived from family may be especially important for academic commitment and persistence among black college freshmen.

Again consistent with the cultural meaning of events framework, event-frequency pathway, peer support was more strongly related to well-being for one ethnic group—in this case, for Caucasian teens. Consistent with prior theoretical and empirical work with secondary school students (cf. Steinberg et al. 1992), peer support for Caucasians may generally converge with parent support in contributing to academic commitment (though not, in this study, for academic performance). In contrast, the general African American peer

culture may be less likely to view academic success positively, and given a smaller pool of academically committed youth available for relationships, students with strong peer ties may more likely contain peers who do not highly value academic success (cf. Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Unfortunately, the current research did not assess the academic values of peer network members, nor differentiate on-campus from off-campus peers.

Neither of the first two studies allows an examination of the historic cultural resource framework independent of the influence of the cultural meaning of events, since each involved youth coping with a specific, transitional event, rather than a general sample of youth coping with daily life in general. Study 3 does allow such an examination.

### STUDY 3: ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

#### Method

##### *Research Participants*

For the current research, a final sample of 215 adolescents and young adults (97 African American, 118 Caucasian; mean age = 20.7) was selected from a larger study sample recruited for a study in stress and coping. The larger study focused on recruiting a cross-section of youth from four age (initially, 13–14; 17–18; 21–22; 25–26), both gender, two ethnicity (black; white), and two social class (middle, lower, calculated using an SES cutoff) groups. A recruitment maximum of 20 individuals for each age–gender–ethnicity–social class subgroup was set. Due to various recruitment obstacles and difficulties (e.g., the city school system denied access to a middle school, and allowed on-site access to high school sophomores only before or after school hours), as well as resource limitations, the maximum per subgroup was rarely reached. The initial age range targets for the recruitment subgroups were modified (15–16, 17–19, 20–23, 24–29) to reflect the reality of research access (10th graders rather than 8th graders) and to expand sample sizes (while retaining a maximum of 20 for each demographic subgroup).

The 215 youth in the current study were recruited primarily from four educational levels: high school sophomores in one of the most respected public high schools in Baltimore ( $n = 35$ ; 19 African American, 16 Caucasian); recent high school graduates planning to attend a metropolitan area university in the Fall (all within 1 hour drive of campus,  $n = 60$ ; 23 African American, 37 Caucasian); current sophomores, juniors, and seniors at the same university ( $n = 74$ ; 39 African American, 35 Caucasian); and alumni who had graduated from the university during the past 2–4 years

( $n = 46$ ; 16 African American, 30 Caucasian). Eighteen individuals similarly recruited who did not complete all study measures (12 African American, 6 Caucasian) were not included in the current research.

### *Procedure*

Individuals were informed of the study through written or verbal announcements in class (high school sophomores; college students), flyers and campus newspaper advertisements (college students), or through direct mailings (recent high school graduates accepted for admission to the university; alumni of the university). Individuals were informed that the goal of the study was to learn about stress and coping among local area youth, and that they would be paid \$10 for taking part in a 60- to 90-minute research session. Each individualized research session involved a semistructured interview (45 minutes on average) and completion of a questionnaire (30 minutes on average). Male and female, black and white, graduate and undergraduate students administered the protocol. Students were trained to administer the protocol in a standardized manner, and to attempt to establish rapport at the start of the session by engaging in friendly conversation. The current study is limited to data obtained from the questionnaire part of the study.

### *Social and Spiritual Support Measures*

Perceptions of social support from parents and from peers were assessed with the same measures used in Study 1. For the current sample, the alpha reliabilities for both the parent support (.91 overall, .90 African American, .91 Caucasian) and peer support (.85 overall, .80 African American, .88 Caucasian) scales were adequate.

Adolescents were also asked to indicate the "most supportive person" in their life at present. Responses were coded into four categories: parent, friend, opposite-sex partner, and other.

Spiritual support was assessed with the same measure used in Study 1. The alpha reliabilities for this measure in the current sample (.90 overall, .88 African American, .89 Caucasian) were adequate.

### *Well-Being Measures*

Depression and self-esteem were assessed with the same measures used in Study 1. The alpha reliabilities for both depression symptoms (.84 over-

all, .83 African American, .86 for Caucasian) and self-esteem (.83 overall, .84 African American, .81 Caucasian) were adequate.

### *Demographic Measures*

Information about gender, age, ethnicity, and SES were obtained directly from the research participant. SES was calculated using Hollingshead's (1975) four-factor index, as in the two previous studies.

## **Results**

### *Preliminary Analyses*

The African American and Caucasian samples did not differ in age ( $M_s = 20.5$  and  $20.9$ , respectively), gender (61.9 and 50.8% female), or SES (39.4 and 40.4). The SES scores place the two groups at the boundary point between the middle and the second highest of the five Hollingshead (1975) social strata.

A MANCOVA with age, gender, and SES as covariates indicated that African Americans reported higher levels of well-being than Caucasians, multivariate  $F(2, 209) = 8.3, p < .01$ . The univariate  $F_s$  indicated that African Americans reported higher levels of self-esteem ( $M = 43.4$ ) than Caucasians ( $M = 40.0$ ),  $F(1, 210) = 16.6, p < .01$ , and marginally lower levels of depression symptoms,  $p < .06$ .

Intercorrelations among all demographic, support, and well-being variables are shown in the Appendix, Table AIII, for blacks and whites separately.

### *Primary Analyses*

*Differences in Support Levels and Most Supportive Person.* To examine ethnic group differences in support levels a MANCOVA with age, gender, and SES as covariates was performed on the support variables. A significant difference between African Americans and Caucasians was obtained, multivariate  $F(3, 208) = 8.6, p < .01$ . The univariate  $F_s$  indicated that African Americans reported higher levels of parent support ( $M = 38.7$ ) than Caucasians (34.7),  $F(1, 210) = 9.6, p < .01$ , and higher levels of spiritual support ( $M_s$  of 10.7 and 8.1, respectively),  $F(1, 210) = 22.7, p < .01$ . There were no significant differences for peer support ( $M_s = 38.6$  and 37.7, respectively) (Table VI). To examine ethnic group differences in who was reported as most supportive person, a chi-square analysis was



performed. A significant finding was obtained,  $\chi^2(3) = 19.3, p < .01$ . African Americans (57.7%) were almost twice as likely as Caucasians (29.7%) to indicate a parent as most supportive person, whereas Caucasians (28.8%) were almost three times as likely as African Americans (11.3%) to indicate an opposite-sex partner (28.8%). The two groups were relatively similar in the proportions who indicated friends and other as most supportive (Table VI).

*Relationship of Support to Well-Being.* To examine ethnic group differences in the relationship between support and well-being, hierarchical regression analyses were performed for the depression symptoms and self-esteem criterion variables. Demographic variables were entered first, followed by the three support variables, and then, in separate steps, the Ethnicity  $\times$  Parent Support, Ethnicity  $\times$  Peer Support, and Ethnicity  $\times$  Spiritual Support interactions (Table VII). For depression symptoms, the demographics together explained a significant 4.8% of variance,  $p < .05$ , and the support variables a significant 7.3%,  $p < .01$ . Parent support was significantly and inversely related to depression symptoms,  $\beta = -.28, p < .01$ . Contrary to expectation, none of the Ethnicity  $\times$  Support interactions were significant. For self-esteem, the demographics together explained a significant 7.7% of variance,  $p < .01$ , and the support variables a significant 11.7%,  $p < .01$ . Parent support,  $\beta = .27, p < .01$ , and peer support,  $\beta = .21, p < .01$ , were each significantly and positively related to self-esteem. Furthermore, the Ethnicity  $\times$  Spiritual Support interaction explained a significant 3.0% of vari-

**Table VI.** Means and Percentages on Support Variables for African American and Caucasian Adolescents and Young Adults

	African American ( <i>n</i> = 97)		Caucasian ( <i>n</i> = 118)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Parent support	38.7 <sup>a</sup>	9.4	34.7	9.6
Peer support	38.6	6.1	37.7	7.4
Spiritual support	10.7 <sup>a</sup>	3.7	8.1	3.9
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Most supportive person				
Parent	57.7 <sup>a</sup>	56	29.7	35
Opposite-sex partner	11.3	11	28.8	34
Friend	20.6	20	28.0	33
Other	10.3	10	13.6	16

<sup>a</sup> $p < .01$ .

ance,  $\beta = .70$ ,  $p < .01$ . As indicated in Figure 3, spiritual support was positively related to self-esteem for African Americans but negatively related for Caucasians.

## Discussion

### *Differences in Support Levels and Most Supportive Person*

Consistent with the historic cultural resource framework, African Americans in this general sample of youth reported higher levels of parent support and spiritual support than Caucasians. These findings are generally consistent with previous research (e.g., Cauce et al., 1982). The higher levels of perceived parental support and spiritual support for African Americans may stem in part from a special cultural-historical role of family and spirituality as anchors for daily coping in a society generally viewed as threatening and nonsupportive (cf. Billingsley, 1992; Boykin, 1983; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; Taylor & Chatters,

**Table VII.** Multiple Regression Results for Depression Symptoms and Self-Esteem for African American and Caucasian Adolescents and Young Adults

Step	Depression symptoms			Self-esteem		
	Entry $\beta$	$R^2$ -change	Correlation	Entry $\beta$	$R^2$ -change	Correlation
1. Demographics		.048 <sup>a</sup>			.077 <sup>b</sup>	
Age	-.06		-.05	.07		.06
SES	-.07		-.06	.04		.03
Gender (female)	.17 <sup>b</sup>		.16 <sup>a</sup>	-.03		.00
Ethnicity (A-A)	-.13		-.10	.27 <sup>b</sup>		.26 <sup>b</sup>
2. Support		.073 <sup>b</sup>			.117 <sup>b</sup>	
Parent	-.28 <sup>b</sup>		-.26 <sup>b</sup>	.27 <sup>b</sup>		.33 <sup>b</sup>
Peer	-.06		-.05	.21 <sup>b</sup>		.25 <sup>b</sup>
Spiritual	.11		-.02	-.06		.16 <sup>a</sup>
3. Ethnicity $\times$ Parent support	-.01	.000		-.12	.001	
4. Ethnicity $\times$ Peer support	-.28	.002		.55	.007	
5. Ethnicity $\times$ Spiritual support	-.35	.008		.70 <sup>b</sup>	.030 <sup>b</sup>	

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup> $p < .01$ .

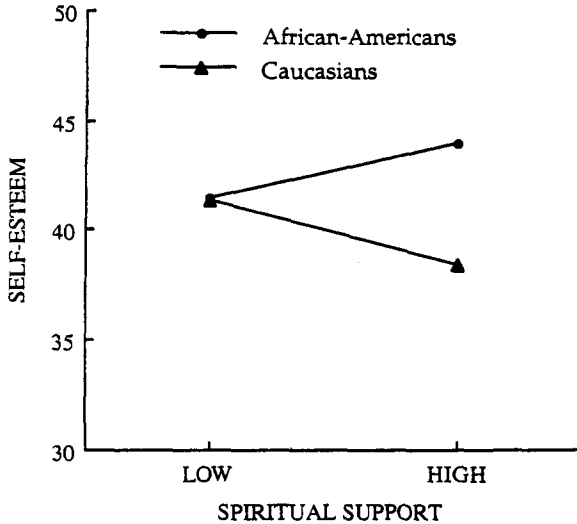


Fig. 3. Spiritual support by ethnicity.

1991). Caucasians were more likely to indicate that their most supportive person was an opposite-sex partner (28.0%) than were African Americans (11.3%). This finding may indicate lesser availability of opposite-sex partners among African Americans, or differences in cultural expectations and norms (i.e., the relatively greater importance of family). Differences in peer support were not expected, and were not found.

#### *Relationship of Support to Well-Being*

The historic cultural resource framework received partial support. The positive relationship between spiritual support and self-esteem among blacks suggests that spiritual support may serve as a partial antidote to the diverse stresses and insults associated with minority group status (and may help explain the higher levels of self-esteem reported by African American than Caucasian youth in many studies). For Caucasians, spiritual support is not a general, salient cultural resource. It is not clear, however, why for Caucasians spiritual support would be linked to lower self-esteem (the two variables were not related at the zero-order level). Contrary to expectation, there was not a differential relationship across ethnic groups of parental support to well-being. No prediction was made concerning

peer support, and a Peer Support  $\times$  Ethnicity interaction was also not found.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken as a group, the findings of the three studies provide partial support for the cultural specificity perspective on support. Three of six predicted ethnicity main effects were significant in expected directions, and five of eight predicted Ethnicity  $\times$  Support interactions were significant (in most cases, for one of two criterion variables) in expected directions. The results generally support related research on cultural differences in support levels or correlates among American adult and elderly populations (e.g., Mirowsky & Ross, 1980; Mutran, 1985; Ulbrich & Bradsher, 1993; Warheit, Vega, Shimizu, & Meinhardt, 1982), and recent cross-cultural research comparing American youth and college students to their counterparts in other nations (Tietjen, 1984; Liang & Bogat, 1994; McKim & Maton, 1995). In the current research, for some support variables in some life contexts, support levels or support relationships to adjustment were greater, in culturally expected directions, for one ethnic group than the other. However, in some cases ethnicity differences in support levels or support relationships to adjustment were not found; thus, there is some evidence for the cultural equivalence of support as well. Since specific findings were discussed following each study, only the overall patterns of results related to cultural specificity are focused on below.

### Mean Levels of Support

#### *Cultural Meaning of Events*

Little support was found for the cultural meaning of events framework as applied to mean differences in support—neither of the two predicted effects were found. Concerning pregnant teens, the only study where this framework applied, either the global measures used were not sensitive enough since they did not focus on support related to pregnancy per se, or else the ethnic group differences expected do not become manifest until after the birth of the baby. Alternatively, perhaps the two ethnic groups did not differ as much in their views on the acceptability and value of teenage pregnancy as authors and commentators have indicated, at least when SES is held constant.

### *Support as an Historic Cultural Resource*

Overall, support for the historic cultural resource framework of support specificity was obtained (three of five predictions supported). Higher mean levels of parent and spiritual support were found among a general sample of African American adolescents and young adults (Study 3). In coping with daily life across diverse contexts in a less than racially friendly society, it makes sense that the historical resources of family and spirituality would be especially salient for African Americans.

Contrary to expectation, higher mean levels of parent support were not found for pregnant teens (Study 1) or college students (Study 2). Higher levels of spiritual support were found for pregnant teens, however (it was not assessed for the college student sample). Apparently, parental support and spiritual support may function somewhat differently as historic cultural resources, that is, levels of parental support but not spiritual support appear to be dependent upon the specific life context in which the sample under study is situated.

### **Relationship of Support to Adjustment**

#### *Cultural Meaning of Events*

Relatively consistent support for the cultural meaning of events framework was found in terms of the relationship of support to adjustment (four of five predictions supported). Based on this framework, when support from a given support source has greater value, appropriateness, meaning, or efficacy in one culture than another, support from that source should be more strongly related to adjustment in that culture than the other. Consistent with this view, peer support was positively related to well-being among African American pregnant teens and to academic commitment among Caucasian college freshmen, whereas it was equally related to well-being for the two ethnic groups in a general sample of youth.

This pattern of findings is consistent with both source-meaning and event-frequency pathways of influence. Related to the source-meaning framework, peer support is more effective when it has special meaning because it symbolically legitimizes and supports a certain life-style or life goal. Related to the event-frequency pathway, peer support is more effective when it occurs in a mutual-help context involving peers who themselves are experiencing the life event—this is more likely to be the case in the ethnic group in which a greater proportion of peers experience the event. Finally, the lack of a peer support by ethnicity interaction in the general

sample of youth and adolescents serves as a kind of "control" supporting the event-focused nature of the framework.

The source-meaning pathway is also implicated, along with the source-discrepancy pathway, in the findings that partner support was especially important for well-being among Caucasian pregnant teens, and family support for academic adjustment among African American college freshmen. In the former case, partner support has special meaning among Caucasians since the partner more likely is expected to become a future spouse, and since partner support may be the sole culturally consonant source of support given generally negative views about teen pregnancy in the larger Caucasian ethnic culture. In the latter case, family support may have special meaning for black college freshmen in predominantly white universities, and also be particularly important since support from peers may not generally converge on the priority of college achievement.

The only prediction of the cultural meaning framework that was not supported was for the pregnant teen sample, in which the expected interaction of parent support and ethnicity was not found. As noted earlier in discussing the lack of ethnicity, main effect differences in parental support, perhaps the global measure of parental support was not event-specific enough, or perhaps differences in parental acceptance of teen pregnancy are not as great as some commentators have indicated, when SES is controlled.

### *Support as an Historic Cultural Resource*

Only two of five interaction predictions of the historical cultural resource model were supported. Spiritual support was more strongly related to well-being for African American than Caucasian youth in the general sample of adolescents and young adults in Study 3, but not for the pregnant teens in Study 1. Perhaps spiritual support by its very nature is a more potent buffer against the varied status indignities in daily life over which an adolescent or young adult has little control and is less important as an historic cultural resource for those classes of life events over which the youth has some level of control (cf., Maton, 1989). The lack of a Parent Support  $\times$  Ethnicity interaction for the general sample of adolescents and young adults may similarly reflect a greater potency of spiritual support than parental support to cope with the uncontrollable status indignities in daily life for African Americans.

Family support was more strongly related to academic adjustment for African-American than Caucasian freshmen, but a Parent Support  $\times$  Ethnicity interaction was not found among pregnant teens. Perhaps the strengths of family as an historic resource for African Americans are es-

pecially important in coping with predominantly white environments, such as the university setting. On the other hand, it is possible that the cultural meaning of events framework (see above) and not the historic cultural resource framework accounts for this particular finding.

Overall, there was some support for both the cultural meaning of events and historic cultural resources frameworks. Since support for the overall cultural specificity perspective was found across multiple samples and for multiple sources of support, there is reason for confidence in the general viability of this perspective.

### Limitations

Although the current research provides partial support for a cultural specificity perspective on support, a number of factors limit the conclusions that can be drawn. Most of the Ethnicity  $\times$  Support interactions explained only a small percentage of variance, indicating a modest role for cultural specificity in explaining the link between support and adjustment. The lack of consistent findings across dependent measures in a given study, and in some cases for hypothesized support predictors across studies further limit the capability to draw firm conclusions about the cultural specificity of support. The correlational, self-report nature of the research precludes drawing strong causal inferences about the support–adjustment relationship—in some cases support may stem from rather than lead to adjustment, or both may be affected by an underlying third variable (e.g., interpersonal skills).

Support specifically linked to teen pregnancy (Study 1), college adjustment (Study 2), or coping with a legacy of racism (Study 3) was not assessed, and represents a priority for future research. Although the general support measures used in the research can be assumed to primarily reflect support related to the defining events of pregnancy and freshman year of college, respectively, they no doubt also reflect to some extent support unrelated to these contexts, thus diluting the power of findings. Assessment of event-specific support is important in future research to allow a more direct examination of the relative importance of event-specific and historic cultural resource models, and a more powerful and fine-tuned examination of the specific processes involved in the cultural specificity of support.

Similarly, various sources of support were not assessed (e.g., extended family), and individual sources of support were not identified (e.g., mother vs. father; same vs. opposite-sex friend; on-campus vs. off-campus support). The spiritual support measure used may be less applicable to individuals with nontraditional religious orientations. The partner support measure

used in Study 1 was developed just for this research and its validity remains unknown. Also, sole reliance on Caucasian research assistants in Study 1 may have influenced findings due to differential levels of comfort or trust established among the African American and Caucasian teens interviewed, a major research consideration which should be given greater weight in future research. More generally, although the reliabilities of measures in the current research were generally equivalent for African Americans and Caucasians, the cultural validity of the measures among African Americans has not been established.

The generalizability of findings is limited due to the specific sampling strategies and research sites utilized in each study and the lack of data about the representativeness of any of the samples. However, the characteristics of the samples and the intercorrelations among key variables are generally consistent with those in the literature. The differential importance across cultures of SES, gender, and age was not examined—that is, three-way interactions among ethnicity, support, and SES, gender, or age—such analyses are planned for a future article. Finally, there were no direct assessments of youth's personal identification with their ethnic group culture or of each ethnic group's norms and values related to the specific life circumstances and support sources studied—future research should carry out such assessments (Benancourt & López, 1993; Mutran, 1985; Vega, 1992), in part using linked ethnographic-quantitative methodologies (e.g., Maton, 1993). In the absence of direct assessments of cultural identification and ethnic group cultural norms, factors such as SES, urban locale, and minority status independent of culture *per se* remain possible explanations of findings (Mirowsky & Ross, 1980; Mutran, 1985).

### **Implications for Future Research and Action**

The limitations notwithstanding, the current research represents one of the few attempts to examine the cultural specificity of support among African American and Caucasian youth, to control for important demographic variables (including SES), and to encompass multiple life contexts. If the current findings are replicated in additional studies, theories of stress, support, and adjustment will need to more carefully consider and incorporate a cultural specificity perspective. Future research will benefit from focusing on additional support sources (e.g., clergy, siblings, extended family; Wilson, 1989), support types (e.g., tangible, informational), characteristics of support providers and recipients (e.g., gender, ethnicity, SES; Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takamishi, & Johnson, 1990), life contexts (e.g., par-



enting, employment, aging), and ethnic groups (e.g., Asian American, Hispanic). Also important for future research is the establishment of the cultural validity of measures for each ethnic minority population and the assessment of support and well-being longitudinally.

The current findings suggest that support-based social interventions should carefully consider the possible specificity of support sources for different ethnic groups, ideally through collaborative planning with the populations to be affected. In future research and action, it is important to maintain the perspective that cultural differences in support levels and correlates do not indicate the superiority or inferiority of one ethnic group over another, but rather different modes of cultural expression and adaptation. Studies are also needed that focus exclusively on variability within ethnic groups and reduce the risk of inappropriate generalizations or stereotypes being drawn from comparative research (e.g., Doucette-Gates, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Landsale, in press; Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, in press). Finally, it is also important to acknowledge and focus on ethnic culture similarities, as well as differences, in support levels and relationships to well-being. The current research is meant to contribute to future work in this important area.

## APPENDIX

### Zero-Order Correlation Tables

Table A1. Correlations Among Variables for African American (Below Diagonal) and Caucasian (Above Diagonal) Pregnant Adolescents Separately

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	—	.10	-.18	.14	.22	.11	.05	.26	.18	-.02	.09
2. SES	.03	—	-.13	-.12	-.09	-.21	.23	-.02	.02	.02	.05
3. Weeks pregnant	.09	-.05	—	-.09	-.15	.05	.01	.01	-.07	-.02	.00
4. Married	—	—	—	—	.01	-.33 <sup>b</sup>	-.20	.19	.08	.15	-.10
5. In school	.56 <sup>b</sup>	-.08	.03	—	—	-.08	-.14	.17	.12	.25	-.17
6. Parent support	-.14	-.10	.13	—	.10	—	-.02	-.17	-.01	-.20	.15
7. Peer support	-.20	.22	-.19	—	-.11	.35 <sup>b</sup>	—	-.18	-.02	.27	-.15
8. Partner support	-.14	.24	-.10	—	-.06	.19	.06	—	.09	-.44 <sup>b</sup>	.36 <sup>a</sup>
9. Spiritual support	-.05	-.11	.03	—	.04	.20	.18	.12	—	.00	.02
10. Depression symptoms	.05	.00	.10	—	-.18	-.42 <sup>b</sup>	-.38 <sup>b</sup>	.03	-.01	—	-.69 <sup>b</sup>
11. Self-esteem	.10	.03	.09	—	.04	.25	.33 <sup>a</sup>	-.08	.07	-.46 <sup>b</sup>	—

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup> $p < .01$ .

**Table AII.** Correlations Among Variables for African American (Below Diagonal) and Caucasian (Above Diagonal) College Freshmen Separately

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender (female)	—	-.08	-.01	.15 <sup>a</sup>	-.23 <sup>b</sup>	.10	.15 <sup>a</sup>	.10	.10
2. SES	.01	—	.06	.00	.13	.01	.13	.02	.00
3. Parents apart	.03	-.11	—	-.18 <sup>a</sup>	-.12	-.23 <sup>b</sup>	-.03	-.08	-.11
4. High school GPA	.01	.05	-.02	—	.41 <sup>b</sup>	-.01	-.03	.43 <sup>b</sup>	.19 <sup>a</sup>
5. SAT	-.01	.01	.06	.46	—	-.10	-.06	.31 <sup>b</sup>	.17 <sup>a</sup>
6. Family support	.24 <sup>a</sup>	.17	-.16	-.10	-.29 <sup>b</sup>	—	.34 <sup>b</sup>	.04	.05
7. Peer support	.31 <sup>b</sup>	.03	-.30 <sup>b</sup>	-.13	-.05	.22	—	-.05	.19 <sup>a</sup>
8. 2nd Semester GPA	.09	.10	-.07	.37 <sup>b</sup>	.30 <sup>b</sup>	.02	-.13	—	.02
9. Institutional & goal commitment	.15	.07	-.01	.21	.08	.29 <sup>a</sup>	.08	-.07	—

<sup>a</sup>*p* < .05.<sup>b</sup>*p* < .01.**Table AIII.** Correlations Among Variables for African American (Below Diagonal) and Caucasian (Above Diagonal) Adolescents and Young Adults Separately

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	—	-.01	.01	.16	.18	.07	-.23 <sup>a</sup>	.24 <sup>b</sup>
2. SES	.12	—	-.03	.13	.04	.00	-.11	.07
3. Gender (female)	.08	.16	—	.08	.27 <sup>b</sup>	.17	.16	-.01
4. Parent support	.10	-.05	.10	—	.23 <sup>a</sup>	.23 <sup>a</sup>	-.25 <sup>b</sup>	.33 <sup>b</sup>
5. Peer support	.11	-.04	.12	.15	—	.37 <sup>b</sup>	-.01	.19 <sup>a</sup>
6. Spiritual support	.06	-.12	.05	.43 <sup>b</sup>	.20 <sup>a</sup>	—	.12	-.07
7. Depression symptoms	.18	.01	.19	-.24 <sup>a</sup>	-.10	-.13	—	-.52 <sup>b</sup>
8. Self-esteem	-.14	-.02	-.05	-.25 <sup>a</sup>	.32 <sup>b</sup>	.30 <sup>b</sup>	-.48 <sup>b</sup>	—

<sup>a</sup>*p* < .05.<sup>b</sup>*p* < .01.

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