

Gender Differences in Social Support: A Question of Skill or Responsiveness?

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Spouses often report that wives provide better social support than husbands. Yet studies observing spouses' supportive interactions challenge this perception, finding no differences between husbands' and wives' supportive behaviors. This article offers reconciliation by suggesting that husbands and wives may differ, not in their skill at providing support, but in their responsiveness to their partners' changing needs over time. Observational and diary data from couples confirmed that, whereas husbands and wives did not differ on average in the support they provided each other, they did differ in the timing of that support. Wives tended to provide better support on days that their husbands experienced greater stress. However, when wives experienced greater stress, their husbands displayed both support and negativity.

Understanding marital quality requires an understanding of the way spouses help each other cope with personal difficulties and stressors. Support from a partner has been shown to aid relationship functioning when individuals are confronted with severe stressors (e.g., Coyne & Smith, 1994; Lichtman, Taylor, & Wood, 1987), as well as minor daily hassles (Repetti, 1989). Spouses receiving higher levels of support generally report greater marital satisfaction (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) and experience better longitudinal marital outcomes (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999) than do unsupported spouses. In contrast, a lack of partner support is frequently cited as a significant reason for relationship dissatisfaction (Baxter, 1986). Moreover, support from other sources does not compensate for a lack of support from a spouse (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986). Once the support provided by spouses is considered, support from other important people provides no significant gains in predicting individuals' well-being or distress (Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988).

Given that spousal support is a key element of marital well-being, researchers have created a sizable literature endeavoring to understand how husbands and wives provide support to their partners. A theme in much of this research, as well as in popular culture, is that wives are more effective support providers than husbands. Not only have wives been described as providing their partners with more support than husbands, but the support that wives provide has appeared more likely to promote coping and well-being (Cutrona, 1996). Yet the characterization of women as superior providers of support is not without some controversy. Recent observational studies examining the support behaviors ex-

changed during laboratory interactions have found no differences in the amount or type of support that husbands and wives provide to their spouses (Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997; Roberts & Greenberg, 2002). Thus, in contrast to much of the prior research that has relied on self-report measures, these studies seem to suggest that husbands and wives are equally skilled in their ability to provide spousal support.

Why then are women so frequently perceived as better support providers, when observational data fail to confirm this assumption? The goal of the current article was to try and answer this question by examining the particular circumstances under which husbands and wives are more or less likely to provide their partners with support. To accomplish this goal, we have divided the remainder of the introduction into three sections. In the first section, we more thoroughly review the discrepant findings regarding gender differences in social support behavior. In the second section, we attempt to reconcile these findings by suggesting that the provision of effective spousal support over the course of a marriage likely involves not only knowing how to support a partner but also understanding when to provide that support to the partner. It is proposed that husbands and wives may differ, not in their ability to provide positive support, but in their responsiveness to their partner's changing need for support over time. In the third section, we describe a study designed to examine the associations between support provision, stress level, and gender within a sample of newly married couples.

Do Men and Women Differ in Their Ability to Provide Social Support?

A widely accepted conclusion within the social support literature is that a "support gap" exists in marital relationships, in that men receive more support, and more helpful support, within a marriage than do women (Belle, 1982; Cutrona, 1996). As a result, "marriage may not provide the rich social support resources to women that it provides to men" (Cutrona, 1996, p. 30). In their own descriptions, husbands and wives tend to agree that wives give more support than they receive from their husbands (Vinokur & Vinokur-Kaplan, 1990). More husbands than wives also tend to

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report that they are affirmed by their spouses (Cutrona, 1996) and that they rely exclusively on the support provided by their spouses (Belle, 1987). Moreover, wives may be more likely than husbands to provide support to a partner following stressful events. Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, and Wethington (1989) have found that wives are more likely than husbands to increase their workload at home on days that their partner experienced as stressful at work, thereby giving partners relief from the chores at home. Together, such findings make a strong case that women are more skilled at providing effective social support to their partners than are men.

To date, however, studies revealing significant gender differences in support provision have relied solely on self-report measures to assess support behaviors. Studies actually observing the way husbands and wives provide support to each other have challenged the support gap assumption, finding no significant differences between husbands' and wives' supportive behaviors (Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997; Roberts & Greenberg, 2002). In one such study, Pasch et al. (1997) had couples engage in two audiotaped 10-min discussions designed to assess behaviors when offering and soliciting social support. In the first discussion, one spouse was asked to identify a personal problem to discuss with his or her partner. The partner was asked to respond to the spouse in any way he or she felt appropriate. In the second discussion, the remaining spouse chose a personal problem to discuss. Thus, each spouse had the opportunity to play the role of support solicitor and support provider. The interactions were then divided into speaking turns, and each speaking turn was coded for whether the behavior was positive (divided into positive instrumental, positive emotional, and positive other), negative, neutral, or off-task. Results revealed that husbands and wives did not differ significantly in the type or the amount of support behaviors displayed during the interactions.

A similar study conducted by Roberts and Greenberg (2002) corroborated these results. In this study, couples participated in interactions designed to examine the process of giving and receiving care. Spouses were asked to engage in 10-min discussions in which they talked to their partner about their vulnerabilities or about aspects of themselves they felt insecure about. The partner was given no instructions on how to respond. These interactions were then coded for a number of interpersonal behaviors, such as active understanding, guidance, intrusive advice, and requests for care. Again, husbands and wives did not differ in the rates of caring behaviors displayed during the interactions. Overall, evidence from observational research indicates that husbands and wives are equally skilled in providing support to their partners.

Social Support as Both Skill and Responsiveness

If observing couples in support situations fails to reveal gender differences in the ability to provide support to a spouse, why is the perception that women are better support providers so widespread? Reconciling the findings from self-report and observational studies may involve recognizing an important limitation of the existing social support literature. Social support research has tended to focus almost exclusively on answering the question of how support affects the recipient's well-being. As a result, most support research has been cross-sectional, comparing the outcomes of supported versus unsupported individuals following a particular stressful event (Cutrona, 1996). This approach to understanding

social support seems to make the critical assumption that providing support is a skill, and if a person possesses that skill, then he or she will give support to the recipient during times of stress (cf. Coyne & Bolger, 1990). In other words, as long as spouses know how to support their partners, they should support their partners when needed. Consequently, researchers exploring support provision have often concentrated on identifying the types of individuals who display better caregiving skills (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2001). Similarly, most interventions for improving support within marriage have been oriented toward teaching partners how to increase their positive communication while decreasing aversive behaviors (Cutrona, 1996). From this perspective, the key to enhancing personal and marital outcomes is ensuring that spouses have the ability to provide their partner with positive support.

This assumption seems unfounded in light of the observational research described earlier. Observational studies examine the general ability to provide support by engaging couples in a laboratory interaction specifically designed to elicit support behaviors. Frequently, these behaviors have been analyzed without regard for the domain or the severity of the topic being discussed. By assessing spouses' ability to communicate support in a situation that essentially demands that spouses support their partners, observational studies provide an estimate of each partner's skills independent of the context in which those skills might be called on. Under these circumstances, husbands and wives have demonstrated equal skills at providing support, and variability in these skills appears to have important implications for marital outcomes (Pasch et al., 1997). However, these observational studies have not accounted for the partner's support needs when they have examined spouses' support skills. In contrast, gender differences have emerged in self-report studies that examined spouses' recollection of their experiences of social support at times when partners faced important difficulties, such as illness or work stress, and needed support. In other words, whereas observational studies have tended to examine general support abilities without reference to the context in which those behaviors are occurring, self-report studies have tended to examine support provision in the context of the specific difficulties that the recipient of support is facing.

Taken together, self-report and observational studies suggest that though husbands and wives may not differ in *how* they support their partners, they may differ in *when* they provide support to their partners. Marriage allows individuals innumerable opportunities to provide support to a spouse. Understanding support processes in marriage is complicated by the fact that, over time, spouses will experience fluctuations in the difficulties they face, and thus may require varying amounts of support from a partner. To be effective in supporting a partner, spouses must know not only how to provide their partners with positive support, but also how to continually adjust their support provision in response to a partner's changing difficulties over the course of the marriage. From this perspective, successfully supporting a partner involves providing him or her with positive support *and* providing this support at times when it is presumably needed most; namely, when spouses are experiencing greater difficulties.

Our goal in the current article was to examine possible differences in husbands' and wives' responsiveness to the varying support needs of their partners. Though numerous researchers have examined spouses' responsiveness to their partner's needs, responsiveness traditionally has been defined as the skill with which

individuals communicate positive support (Cutrona, 1996). The current article defines responsiveness in terms of the timing of the support provided. Though husbands and wives may be equally skilled in their ability to communicate positive support to a partner, the "support gap" frequently found in self-report studies may indicate that women simply are more likely to alter their support provision to meet their partner's varying stressful experiences. In other words, women may be more likely than men to provide support at those critical times when their partners are experiencing greater difficulties.

Overview of the Current Study

In the current study, we aimed to clarify the circumstances under which husbands and wives are more or less likely to provide their partners with support. Specifically, this study was designed to answer the question: Do husbands and wives differ in their tendency to provide support when their partners are faced with greater difficulties? This overarching question was addressed at both the between-subjects and the within-subject level with observational and daily diary measures of support provision. Examining the between-subjects association between spouses' problems and their partners' support provision provided information on whether spouses experiencing the most difficult problems tended to get the most support from their partners. Examining the within-subject association between fluctuations in a spouse's problems and variability in the partner's support provision provided information on whether spouses alter their support provision as their partner's problems and stressors vary over time. Both of these questions examine spouses' responsiveness to each other's needs, independent of their general skill at providing support.

To examine these issues, we asked newlywed couples participating in a broader study of marital development to participate in a series of videotaped social support interactions and to complete a 7-day daily diary that asked them to report on their daily stress and their perceptions of support from their partners. Analysis of the observational support data addressed two specific questions. First, do husbands and wives differ in their skill at providing support to their spouses? In line with previous work (Pasch et al., 1997), it was predicted that, on average, husbands and wives would display no significant differences in the type or amount of support they provided to their partners during the interaction. Thus, when examining basic support provision skills without reference to the partner's problem severity, we expected that husbands and wives would appear equally able to provide positive support to their partners.

Second, do husbands and wives differ in the amount of support they provide their partners when their partners have more severe problems? When examining the association between the severity of spouses' problems and their partner's support quality, we predicted that husbands with more severe difficulties would receive the best support from their wives. This association was expected to be weaker when examining wives' problem severity and husbands' supportive behaviors. Thus, when examining support provision in the context of the partner's specific difficulties, it was predicted that wives, but not husbands, would provide better support when their partners were most likely to need that support.

Analysis of the diary data had two primary goals: first, to replicate the findings of the observational data and, second, to

extend these findings by examining when support naturally tends to be enacted over the course of a continuing relationship. In other words, these analyses aimed to address not only whether spouses with greater problems received more support but also whether, at the within-subject level, individuals were receiving more support from their spouse at times when they were experiencing higher levels of stress than normal. In general, self-report measures of support make it difficult to tease apart whether perceptions of support are based on actual support received or simply driven by more stable aspects of the person or the marriage. In this way, measures of perceived support can make it hard to clarify whether partners are altering their support behaviors according to their spouse's stress. However, it has been argued that diary data may be less influenced by the biases commonly found in self-report data, as spouses are reporting on events soon after they occur (Reis & Collins, 2000). Asking spouses to report on the day's events each night limits the possibility that spouses' reports will be distorted because of biases in the recollection or selection of events. Moreover, collecting measures of stress and support over time enabled us to further limit the possibility that third variables, such as the recipient's personality, are affecting the results by allowing for the within-person estimation of the association between stress and perceptions of support, controlling for spouses' idiosyncratic tendency to view their stress and their support more or less favorably.

Analysis of diary data addressed three specific questions. First, do husbands and wives differ on average in the amount of support they report receiving from their partners over the 7-day period? It was predicted that the results from the observational data would replicate in that husbands and wives would display no differences in the amount of support they perceived across the 7 days. Thus, when examining general perceptions of support without reference to the context in which the support is occurring (i.e., the partner's stress level) husbands and wives were expected to feel equally supported by their partners over time.

Second, are spouses with the most stress perceiving the best support? When examining the between-subjects association between spouses' exposure to negative stressors and their perceptions of their partners' support quality, we predicted that the results from the observational data would replicate in that husbands experiencing the greatest stress across the 7 days of the diary would report receiving the most support from their wives. This association was expected to be weaker when examining wives' stress and perceptions of husbands' supportive behaviors.

Finally, do husbands, more than wives, perceive their spouses as being responsive to their changing stress level over time? When examining the within-person association between changes in stress and changes in support over time, we predicted that as husbands experienced more stress than average, they would report receiving more support from their wives. However, the association between wives' stress and their perceptions of support from their husbands was expected to be weaker. In this way, it was predicted that husbands would be more likely than wives to feel most supported on days when their stress level is highest.

Method

Participants

Couples were recruited for this study by two methods. First, advertisements were placed in community newspapers and bridal shops. Second,

letters were sent to couples who had applied for marriage licenses in Alachua County, Florida. Couples responding to either method of solicitation were screened in a telephone interview to determine whether they met the following criteria: (a) this was the first marriage for each partner, (b) the couple had been married less than 6 months, and (c) neither partner had children. The final sample consisted of 169 couples.

On average, husbands were 25.6 ($SD = 4.1$) years old, and had received 16.3 ($SD = 2.4$) years of education. Fifty-nine percent were employed full time, and 34% were full-time students. Wives averaged 23.4 ($SD = 3.6$) years old and had received 16.2 ($SD = 2.0$) years of education. Forty-five percent were employed full time, and 45% were full-time students. Slightly over 65% of the sample was Christian, and 94% of husbands and 86% of wives were White.

Procedure

Within the first 6 months of their marriage, couples meeting eligibility requirements were scheduled to attend a 3-hr laboratory session. During the session, we interviewed the couples individually, and they interacted with one another in a series of dyadic tasks. One of these tasks was the social support interaction task. Each couple engaged in two 10-min discussions designed to assess behaviors when offering and soliciting social support. In the first of the two discussions, one spouse was randomly selected to identify a personal problem or something about him- or herself that he or she would like to change. Spouses were specifically instructed to choose a topic that was strictly a personal issue and not a marital issue. Typical topics mentioned were exercising more, changing a bad habit, or enriching one's spiritual life. Prior to engaging in the discussion, spouses completed a questionnaire concerning their thoughts and expectations for the discussion. As part of this questionnaire, the spouse who chose the topic was asked about the severity of the problem he or she was about to discuss. Spouses then discussed their topic with their partner for 10 min, during which time the partner was told to respond in whatever way he or she felt was appropriate. After the first discussion, the roles were reversed such that the remaining spouse was asked to choose the topic for the next discussion. Spouses were encouraged not to choose the same issues. Thus, each spouse had the opportunity to play the role of the support provider. Couples were paid \$50 for participating in this part of the study.

At the end of the lab session, couples were asked to participate in a 7-day daily diary task. Couples could choose from two methods for completing the diary. First, couples could opt to complete a paper version of the diary. In this case, each spouse was given all 7 nights of the diary along with a set of prestamped envelopes. Couples were instructed to independently fill out one diary each night before going to bed and to drop that diary in the mail the next morning. Second, couples with Internet access could choose to complete an online version of the diary. Husbands and wives were each given a Website address and a unique code that allowed them to log into the study Website. Again, couples were instructed to independently complete one diary each night before going to bed. Couples were paid an additional \$25 for participating in this part of the study.

Overall, 146 couples (86%) participated in the daily diary portion of the study. Couples participating in the diary portion of the study did not differ from the rest of the sample in global marital satisfaction or in any demographic variable (e.g., age, education, income). Furthermore, couples participating in the diary portion of the study did not differ from the rest of the sample in their observed support skills or in the severity of the problems they discussed during the interactions. Of these 146 couples, 44.5% (65 couples) chose to complete paper diaries and 55.5% (81 couples) opted for the online diary. Couples completing the online diary did not differ from couples completing the paper diary in marital satisfaction or on any demographic variable. Spouses completing the online diary also did not differ from spouses completing the paper diary in their average stress or their average perceptions of support over the 7-day period. Eighty-four percent (119 couples) of husbands and wives completed all 7 nights of the

diary. Whether spouses chose the paper diary or the online diary did not affect the amount of data spouses provided. Spouses completing all 7 nights of the diary did not differ from spouses providing less data in their average stress or their average support perceived over the week. However, as data were examined through growth curve modeling, participants who did not provide all 7 days of data could be included in the analyses. Thus, the results reported are based on data from all 146 couples that completed the diary.

Materials

Behavioral observation coding. The Social Support Interaction Coding System (SSICS; Bradbury & Pasch, 1992) was used to assess the behaviors spouses displayed during the support interaction tasks. Each 10-min interaction was divided into speaking turns, and each speaking turn was then coded. Using the SSICS, each support provider speaking turn may receive one of six codes: positive emotional, positive instrumental, positive other, negative, neutral, or off-task. Positive emotional is assigned to behaviors that reassure, console, or otherwise encourage the support solicitor, letting the solicitor know that he or she is loved (e.g., "I'm proud of the progress you have made, you have gotten much better about exercising"). Positive instrumental codes are given to behaviors that offer the support solicitor specific suggestions on how to reach desired goals or otherwise assist the solicitor in developing a course of action for solving the problem (e.g., "So, next time you see your boss, what are you going to ask him?"). Positive other includes all positive statements that do not fall within the previous two categories. All statements providing insight into the cause of the problem or encouraging further discussion of the problem would receive this code (e.g., "Why do you think that?"). Negative includes behaviors such as criticizing or blaming the support solicitor or offering inconsiderate advice (i.e., "You just need to figure this out and stop complaining about it"). Neutral was given to behaviors that are related to the problem, but are more factual in nature (i.e., "What time is your appointment tomorrow?"). Finally, off-task was given to all behaviors not relevant to the issue at hand (e.g., "By the way, did you feed the dog this morning?").

Five research assistants were trained to independently code the interactions using the SSICS. Interrater reliability, which was assessed by having randomly selected pairs of observers code a randomly selected 25% of the interactions, was generally quite high (intraclass correlation coefficients = .55 for positive emotional, .82 for positive instrumental, .72 for positive other, .84 for negative, .87 for neutral, and .99 for off-task). To analyze the codes, we divided the number of times each code was assigned to each spouse by the total number of speaking turns of that spouse. Thus, each code was analyzed as a proportion of the total speaking turns to control for variation across spouses in the number of speaking turns.

Problem severity. Prior to discussing their support topic with their partner, spouses were asked three questions designed to assess spouses' problem severity: "How important to you is the problem you are about to discuss?," "How much does the problem affect other areas of your life?," and "To what extent do you need a solution to the problem right away?" For each item, spouses responded on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). The internal consistency of the three items was high for husbands and for wives (coefficient $\alpha = .73$ for both spouses). We created composite scores by averaging the three items, with higher scores indicating a more severe problem.

Daily stressful life circumstances. To assess spouses' daily stress, we presented them with nine events likely to occur in the daily lives of young couples and asked them to indicate whether the event had occurred that day. These items were taken from measures of daily stress used in prior diary research (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). Events were chosen to meet two criteria. First, the event could not represent a likely consequence of marital satisfaction or marital distress. Thus, the measure taps only those stressors external to (i.e., unlikely to be caused by) the marriage. In this way, the possibility that both stress and support would be driven by the quality of the marriage, thus artificially inflating the associ-

ation, was limited. Second, the event had to represent a negative stressor. Evidence suggests that the adaptation to negative events taxes individuals in a way that positive events do not (Turner & Wheaton, 1997). Consequently, as the purpose of the study was to examine whether spouses received more support when they needed that support the most (i.e., when they were under high stress), the current study focused on negative stressors only. Examples of items are "received poor evaluation or feedback at work or at school," "a lot to do at work or at school," "problems with transportation," "sickness or injury," and "argument with friends." A composite stress score was computed for each spouse on each of the 7 days by adding together the total number of stressors spouses reported experiencing on that day.

Daily perceptions of spousal support. To assess spouses' perceptions of support from their partner, we presented spouses with a list of six generally supportive behaviors that were likely to occur in the daily interactions of young couples and likely to vary over time. For each event, spouses were asked simply to indicate whether the event happened to them that day. Support behaviors included "spouse said something that made you feel loved," "spouse listened to or comforted you," "spouse showed an interest in the events of your day," and "spouse helped you out with something important." A composite support score was computed for each spouse on each of the 7 days by adding together the total number of support behaviors spouses reported receiving on that day. A total support score also was created for each spouse by summing spouses' support perceptions over the 7 days.

Daily perceptions of negative spousal behaviors. Spouses also were presented a list of three negative spousal behaviors that were likely to occur in the daily interactions of young couples and likely to vary over time. Similar to support behaviors, spouses were asked simply to indicate whether the event had occurred that day. These negative spousal behaviors were "argument with spouse," "spouse let you down or broke a promise," and "criticized by spouse." A composite negative spousal behavior score was computed for each spouse on each of the 7 days by adding together the total number of negative behaviors spouses reported occurring on that day. A total negative behavior score also was created for each spouse by summing spouses' perceptions of negative behaviors over the 7 days.

Daily hours spent together. For spouses to have the opportunity to receive support from a partner on a given day, they must have the opportunity to interact with their partner on that day. Thus, to control for the time spouses were able to spend together each day, we asked spouses to indicate the number of hours (not counting time sleeping) that they spent with their spouse each day. Husbands and wives tended to agree on the number of hours they spent together each day (correlations ranged from .80 to .89). On average, husbands and wives reported spending 7.4 ($SD = 3.3$) waking hours together each day.

Data Analysis

Some of the hypotheses concerning the association between stress and spousal support required within-subject analyses. A within-subject approach allowed us to examine whether changes in a spouse's stress were associated with changes in his or her perceptions of support from a partner, controlling for spouses' idiosyncratic tendency to view their stress and their support more or less favorably. To address hypotheses at the within-subject level, we examined data with hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992), implemented with the HLM/2L computer program (Bryk, Raudenbush, & Congdon, 1994). This approach was adopted for several reasons. First, in contrast to other approaches to analyzing multilevel models (e.g., structural equation modeling), HLM provides reliable estimates of within-subject parameters even when sample sizes are relatively small. Second, HLM provides maximally efficient estimates of these parameters by weighting individual estimates according to empirical Bayes theory. When the within-subject parameter for an individual can be estimated precisely, the final estimate relies heavily on

the individual data. When the parameter cannot be estimated precisely (e.g., because of missing data), the final estimate relies more heavily on the mean of the sample. Because the most precise estimates therefore contribute more to the final estimated variance of the sample, variances estimated in this way tend to be more conservative than those obtained through traditional OLS methods.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for husbands and wives' observed support provision behaviors. Given that the proportion of positive emotional and positive instrumental behaviors displayed in the interactions were fairly low (positive emotional was .01 for both spouses; positive instrumental was .09 and .11 for husbands and wives, respectively), all positive support provider codes were collapsed into a single variable to simplify further analyses. Overall, spouses tended to exhibit fairly positive support provision behaviors during the interactions. Positive and negative support behaviors were significantly negatively associated for both husbands and wives, $r(169) = -.19, p = .01$ and $r(169) = -.28, p < .001$, respectively, such that spouses who provided more positive support also tended to provide less negative support. Within couples, husbands' positive and negative support provision behaviors were significantly associated with the positive and negative support provision behaviors of their wives, $r(169) = .33, p < .001$, for positive behaviors and $r(169) = .35, p < .001$, for negative behaviors. Thus, husbands who were more skilled in their support abilities tended to have wives who also were highly skilled in their support abilities.

With regard to spouses' problem severity, average problem severity was 4.7 ($SD = 1.2$) for husbands and 5.0 ($SD = 1.2$) for wives. Thus, spouses seemed to be discussing fairly serious issues in the support interactions. Within couples, husbands' problem severity was not significantly associated with their wives' problem severity, $r(169) = -.01, p = .90$. A paired-sample t test revealed that wives rated their problems as being more severe than husbands rated theirs, $t(168) = -2.1, p = .04$.

Turning to the diary data, Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for spouses' stress, spouses' perceptions of support, and spouses' perceptions of negative spousal behaviors across the 7 days. As seen in the table, the average daily stress spouses reported

Table 1
Results for Support Behaviors Displayed During Support Interaction Tasks

Support provision behavior	Proportion of behavior				Gender difference $t(168)$
	Husband		Wife		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Positive emotional	.01	.02	.01	.03	0.05
Positive instrumental	.10	.09	.11	.10	-1.41
Positive other	.37	.18	.36	.18	0.52
Total positive	.48	.20	.48	.22	-0.26
Negative	.02	.05	.01	.06	0.54
Neutral	.41	.17	.38	.19	1.41
Off-task	.08	.12	.11	.15	-1.80

Table 2
Results for Daily Stress, Perceived Spousal Support, and Perceived Negative Spousal Behaviors

Variable	7 days of diary						Gender difference $t(141)$
	Husband			Wife			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	
Stress	0.86	0.52	0.0–2.4	0.81	0.57	0.0–2.6	0.93
Perceived support	3.12	1.23	0.0–6.0	3.20	1.25	0.0–6.0	–0.90
Negative behaviors	0.31	0.39	0.0–2.0	0.27	0.36	0.0–2.0	1.51

was fairly low. Nevertheless, the range of the stressors reported suggests there was variability in the number of stressors spouses were experiencing. Not surprisingly, given the newly married sample, spouses reported receiving a high amount of support and perceiving rather low amounts of negative behaviors from their spouses. Correlations between perceptions of support and perceptions of negative behaviors on each day revealed that support behaviors and negative behaviors were not significantly associated for husbands (correlations ranged from $-.04$ to $-.11$) or for wives (correlations ranged from $-.09$ to $-.25$). Likewise, the correlations between total support and total negative behaviors over the week also demonstrated that these behaviors were not significantly related ($r = .04$, $p = .71$, for husbands and $r = -.09$, $p = .35$, for wives).

Examination of the between-subjects correlations between stress and perceived support on each day revealed that spouses' stress tended not to be significantly associated with their perceptions of support from their partners (correlations ranged from $.06$ to $.19$ for husbands and from $-.18$ to $.19$ for wives). Likewise, spouses' stress tended not to be significantly associated with their perceptions of negative behaviors from their partners (correlations ranged from $-.02$ to $.13$ for husbands and from $.01$ to $.13$ for wives).

Within couples, husbands' daily stress was positively and significantly associated with wives' daily stress (correlations ranged from $.20$ to $.38$), such that husbands experiencing more stress on a given day tended to have wives experiencing greater stress on that day as well. Husbands' perceptions of support on a given day were significantly positively correlated with wives' perceptions of support on that day (correlations ranged from $.34$ to $.56$). Likewise, husbands' perceptions of negative behaviors on a given day were significantly positively associated with wives' perceptions of negative behaviors on that day (correlations ranged from $.35$ to $.61$).

Husbands' observed positive and negative support provision behaviors during the support interactions were not significantly correlated with wives' total perceptions of support received from their husbands during the diary portion of the study, $r(146) = -.01$, $p = .90$, and $r(146) = -.12$, $p = .19$, for observed positive and negative behaviors, respectively. Similarly, wives' observed positive and negative support provision behaviors during the support interactions were not significantly correlated with husbands' total perceptions of support received from their wives during the diary portion of the study, $r(146) = .03$, $p = .79$, and $r(146) = -.14$, $p = .14$, for observed positive and negative behaviors, respectively. Thus, spouses' observed support skills did not seem to be related to their partners' reports of the amount of support received over the 7-day period.

In sum, preliminary analyses indicate that all measures performed generally as expected. Though the preliminary results of the diary data demonstrated no relationship between perceived support and stress, these bivariate correlations do not threaten subsequent analyses, as they do not address the within-subject associations between variability in stress and variability in perceptions of support. To examine the hypotheses of the current study, the following sections present results of analyses investigating these associations directly.

Do Husbands and Wives Differ in Their Observed Support Skills?

The first goal of the study was to examine whether husbands and wives differed in their observed basic ability to provide positive support to their partners. Paired-sample t tests were conducted to determine whether husbands and wives differed in the proportion of positive, negative, neutral, or off-task behaviors they displayed during the support interaction tasks. As seen in Table 1, no significant differences were found in husbands' and wives' support provision behaviors. As predicted, when we examined general support provision without regard for the severity of the problem being discussed, husbands and wives were equally effective in their ability to provide support to their partners.

Do Husbands and Wives Differ in Their Responsiveness to Their Partners' Problem Severity?

Though husbands and wives did not differ on average in their support provision abilities, the second goal of the study was to examine whether husbands and wives differ in the quality of support they provide when their partners have more severe problems. To address this hypothesis, we examined the between-subjects correlation between spouses' observed positive and negative support behaviors and the partner's self-reported severity of the problem under discussion. Results revealed that husbands' support provision behaviors during the interactions were not significantly associated with severity of their wives' problem, $r(169) = .12$, $p = .10$, for positive behaviors and $r(169) = .01$, $p = .89$, for negative behaviors. However, wives' positive support provision during the interaction was significantly associated with the severity of their husbands' problem, such that husbands discussing more severe problems tended to receive the best support from their wives, $r(169) = .17$, $p = .03$. Wives' negative behaviors were not significantly associated with the severity of their husbands' problem, $r(169) = .01$, $p = .95$. Additional analysis

revealed that this pattern of results held true when we controlled for spouses' marital satisfaction, ensuring that the results were not driven simply by differences in global satisfaction.

It should be noted that though the correlation between husbands' positive support behaviors and wives' problem severity did not reach significance, the difference in the size of the correlation for husbands and for wives was rather modest. This is not surprising given the nature of the support interaction task. These support interactions are specifically designed to elicit supportive behaviors. Thus, testing the responsiveness hypothesis in a situation that to an extent demands that spouses provide support to their partner represents a highly conservative test in that the characteristics of the task are likely to weaken the effect of problem severity on support behaviors. Despite these demand characteristics, the pattern of results nonetheless provides initial evidence that, whereas husbands and wives do not appear to differ in their general ability to provide support to their partners, they may differ in their likelihood of providing that support when their partner is faced with more difficult problems.

Do Husbands and Wives Differ in Their Perceptions of Support From Their Partners?

The first goal of the analyses of the diary data was to examine whether husbands and wives differed in the amount of support they reported receiving on average across the 7 days. Paired-sample *t* tests were conducted to determine whether husbands and wives differed in the amount of supportive behaviors and the amount of negative behaviors they perceived from their partners. As seen in Table 2, no significant gender differences in average daily perceptions of supportive behaviors or negative behaviors were found. Similar to the observational data, when we examined general perceptions of support without regard for spouses' stress, husbands and wives reported feeling equally supported by their partners over the course of the week. Thus, husbands and wives viewed their partners as being equally capable of engaging in supportive behaviors.

Are Spouses Experiencing the Most Stress Perceiving the Most Support?

The second goal of the diary analyses was to examine the between-subjects association between spouses' stress and the amount of support they reported receiving from their partners. As with the observational data, gender differences in support were expected to emerge when examining spouses' perceptions of support in the context of their current stress level. To address this hypothesis, we estimated the average level of stress each spouse experienced across the 7 days using HLM according to the following equation:

$$\text{Stress} = \beta_{0j} + \text{error} . \tag{1}$$

This approach for computing each spouse's average stress was chosen because HLM allows for the computation of a latent stress variable from the 7 days of stress data rather than using the raw average, thus disattenuating estimated associations from measurement error. To determine the association between spouses' stress and their total perceptions of support, we estimated the following equation at the between-subjects level of the HLM analysis:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Spouses' Average Stress} = & \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} \\ & \times (\text{Total Perceptions of Support}) + \gamma_{12} \\ & \times (\text{Total Perceptions of Negative Behaviors}) + \text{error} . \tag{2} \end{aligned}$$

In this equation, γ_{11} captures the association between the average amount of stress spouses experienced across the 7 days and the total amount of support they perceived from their partner over the course of the week. A positive γ_{11} would indicate that spouses experiencing more stress tended to perceive more positive support from their partner. γ_{12} captures the association between spouses' average stress and the total amount of negative spousal behaviors they perceived over the course of the week. In other words, a negative γ_{12} indicates that spouses experiencing more stress, on average, tended to report receiving fewer negative behaviors from their partners. Parameters describing husbands' and wives' data were estimated simultaneously according to procedures described by Bryk and Raudenbush (1992).

Results presented in Table 3 indicate that husbands' stress was positively associated with their perceptions of positive support, such that husbands experiencing more stress over the week reported receiving more positive support from their wives. Husbands' stress was not significantly associated with their perceptions of their wives' negative spousal behaviors. On the contrary, wives' stress was not significantly associated with their perceptions of positive support from their husbands. It was, however, positively associated with their perceptions of their husbands' negative behaviors, such that wives experiencing more stress reported receiving more negative behaviors from their husbands. This pattern of results held even when controlling for spouses' marital satisfaction and aspects of spouses' personality, such as extraversion, neuroticism, and depression, ensuring that individual differences in these factors were not driving the results.

To determine whether the associations between stress and support perceptions were significantly different for husbands and wives, we specified a model in which the size of the associations were constrained to be equal for husbands and for wives. Results indicated that the strength of the association between stress and perceptions of positive support did not differ for husbands and wives, $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 1.35, p = .24$. There was a trend for the association between stress and perceptions of negative behavior to be stronger for wives than for husbands, $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 3.08, p = .07$. Though these direct comparisons did not indicate significant differences between husbands and wives, the overall pattern of significant results nevertheless seems to corroborate the find-

Table 3
Between-Subjects Associations Between Total Perceived Support and Average Stress Over 7 Days

Average stress	γ	SE	<i>t</i> (139)	Effect size <i>r</i>
Husbands				
Positive support	.02	.01	2.63**	.25
Negative behaviors	.01	.02	0.78	.08
Wives				
Positive support	.01	.01	1.30	.13
Negative behaviors	.06	.03	2.14*	.20

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

ings from the observational data. Over the 7 days, husbands with the most stress reported getting the most support from their wives. Highly stressed wives, on the other hand, not only failed to report that their partners were significantly more helpful but also indicated that their partners were engaging in more negative spousal behaviors.

Are Changes in Stress Associated With Changes in Support Perceptions Over Time?

The third goal of the diary analyses was to examine at the within-subject level whether husbands and wives report differences in their partners' responsiveness to their changing stress level over time. When examining the association between changes in stress and changes in perceived support, we predicted that, for husbands, increases in stress would be associated with increases in the perception of support from a spouse. This association, however, was predicted to be weaker for wives.

To address this hypothesis in a way that controlled for potential participant fatigue over the 7 days, we examined the association between changes in stress and changes in the perception of support and in negative behaviors according to the following HLM equation:

$$\text{Stress} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{day}) + \beta_{2j} (\text{hours spent together}) \\ + \beta_{3j} (\text{perceived support}) \\ + \beta_{4j} (\text{perceived negative behaviors}) + \text{error}, \quad (3)$$

where day, hours spent together, and perceived support and perceived negative behaviors were centered within persons. In this equation, β_{0j} represents an estimate of a spouse's average level of stress across the 7 days. β_{3j} captures the within-person association between changes in stress and changes in the perception of support over time for a given spouse, controlling for the day the diary was completed, the amount of time spouses spent together that day, and perceptions of negative behaviors. A positive β_{3j} indicates that increases in a spouse's stress are associated with increases in the amount of support the spouse reports receiving. β_{4j} captures the within-person association between changes in stress and changes in the perception of negative behaviors over time for a given spouse, controlling for the day the diary was completed, the amount of time spouses spent together that day, and perceptions of support. A negative β_{4j} indicates that increases in a spouse's stress are associated with decreases in the amount of negative behaviors the spouse reports receiving. This equation was estimated for each spouse, and the significance of the average β_3 and β_4 terms across spouses was investigated.

Results indicated that when husbands were experiencing higher levels of stress than normal, they also tended to report receiving more supportive behaviors from their wives (see Table 4). Changes in husbands' stress were not significantly associated with their perceptions of negative behaviors from their wives. Turning to wives, increases in wives' stress were associated with their perceptions of supportive behaviors and their perceptions of negative behaviors. When wives were experiencing higher levels of stress than normal, they reported receiving more supportive behaviors from their husbands. However, they also reported receiving greater numbers of negative behaviors from their husbands. In other

Table 4
Within-Subjects Associations Between Perceived Support and Stress Over 7 Days

Stress	β	SE	$t(144)$	Effect size r
Husbands				
Positive support	.07	.02	3.32***	.27
Negative behaviors	.05	.04	0.12	.01
Wives				
Positive support	.09	.02	4.33***	.34
Negative behaviors	.10	.04	2.51**	.21

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

words, as husbands' stress increased, they reported that their wives responded to this increase by providing them with more support. As wives' stress increased, they reported that their husbands responded by providing them with more supportive *and* more negative behaviors. Further analyses revealed that spouses' personality did not moderate the results, as the same pattern of results held when controlling for factors such as spouses' extraversion, neuroticism, or depression. The results also held when we controlled for spouses' global marital satisfaction, ensuring that the results were not driven by differences in marital happiness.

Unfortunately, problems of multicollinearity made it impossible to run a model including both husbands and wives parameters simultaneously. To compare the strength of the associations between stress and perceptions of spousal behaviors for husbands and wives, we saved the associations for each spouse in a residual file (see Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). Paired sample t tests were then conducted to determine whether husbands and wives differed in their average associations between stress and perceived supportive and negative behaviors. Results revealed that husbands and wives did not differ in the strength of the association between stress and perceived support, $t(141) = -1.1, p = .28$. However, the strength of the association between stress and perceived negative behaviors was significantly greater for wives than for husbands, $t(141) = -4.8, p < .001$, suggesting that though husbands and wives reported equal increases in support when they were experiencing more stress than usual, wives experiencing more stress reported significantly greater increases in negative behaviors than did husbands.

The finding that wives tended to perceive more negative behaviors from their husbands as their stress increased is particularly intriguing given that preliminary analyses revealed that perceptions of support and perceptions of negative behaviors were not significantly correlated for husbands or for wives. In other words, wives' perceptions of their husbands' support were independent of their perceptions of their husbands' negative behaviors, indicating that, on average, wives viewed their husbands as capable of providing support without also engaging in negative behaviors. It is only when wives were experiencing higher levels of stress that wives reported their husbands were unable to provide support without also providing negative behaviors. Thus, these findings suggest that whereas wives perceived their husbands as generally capable of providing support, they also perceived their husbands as responding to increases in their stress in an overall less positive manner. In this way, husbands and wives were reporting that their partners were differentially responsive to their changing stress level over time.

Discussion

Rationale and Summary of Results

The manner in which spouses support one another through both good and bad times is an important component of marital quality (Cutrona, 1996; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Therefore, understanding relationship outcomes requires an understanding of how husbands and wives provide support to their partners. Prior literature on support provision within close relationships has revealed contradictory findings about husbands' and wives' ability to provide support to a partner. Self-report studies, which frequently examine support provision within the context of a specific stressor, have suggested that wives tend to provide more support to their partners than do husbands. Observational studies, which tend to examine basic support skills without regard for the context in which that support is occurring, have challenged this idea, finding no significant differences in the amount or type of support husbands and wives give to their spouses. The goal of the current article was to reconcile these findings by examining the circumstances under which husbands and wives are more or less likely to provide their partners with positive support. Results of a study of married couples that used both observational and self-report measures of support and used both cross-sectional, between-subjects analyses, and longitudinal, within-subject, analyses suggest that husbands and wives may not differ in their basic ability to provide support but rather in when they are likely to provide that support to their partners.

Confirming prior research observing support behaviors in couples, the current study indicated that when the support behaviors spouses display are observed without regard for the severity of the topic being discussed, husbands and wives do not differ in their general ability to provide support to a partner. Husbands and wives exhibited equal proportions of positive, negative, neutral, and off-task behaviors during the support interactions, indicating that both husbands and wives possess the basic skills necessary to provide positive support to their partners. However, husbands and wives did seem to differ in their tendency to provide positive support when their partners were discussing more severe problems. When husbands reported that their problems were more severe, their wives were rated as better support providers. The same was not true for wives reporting more difficult problems. Interestingly, this gender difference emerged even though these social support interactions were designed to elicit supportive behaviors from spouses and thus represent a highly conservative test of whether husbands and wives differentially respond to their partner's problem severity.

Results of the diary data replicated and extended the findings of the observational data. When examining perceptions of support without regard for spouses' specific level of stress, we obtained results that revealed that husbands and wives did not differ in the amount of support they perceived from their partners over the 7 days. Husbands and wives reported feeling equally supported by their partners over time, suggesting that both husbands and wives viewed their partners as generally capable of providing them with support.

However, though spouses did not differ in the amount of support they perceived from their partners on average, husbands and wives did differ in *when* they perceived that support. Similar to the results of the observational data, between-subjects analyses re-

vealed that husbands who experienced the greatest levels of stress over the 7 days reported receiving the most support from their wives. Husbands' stress was not associated with perceptions of negative spousal behaviors. On the contrary, wives experiencing greater stress did not report receiving the most support from their husbands. In fact, the most stressed wives tended to report receiving the greatest amounts of negative behaviors from their husbands. Though direct tests for gender differences tended not to be significant, this overall pattern of results is consistent with the idea that husbands and wives may differ in the way they regulate their support provision when their partners are experiencing stress.

The most direct test of whether husbands and wives are differentially responsive to their partners' stress was conducted by examining whether at the level of the individual, spouses report receiving more support on days when they are experiencing higher than normal levels of stress. For both husbands and wives, increases in stress were associated with increases in the perception of support from a partner. However, for wives, increases in stress were also associated with increases in the perception of *negative* behaviors. Interestingly, wives' perceptions of support and of negative behaviors generally were not significantly correlated, indicating that wives viewed their husbands as capable of providing support without also engaging in negative behaviors. Only when experiencing greater stress than normal did wives indicate that their husbands were unable to provide support without also behaving negatively. Again, this pattern of results is consistent with the idea that wives may adjust their support provision to meet their husbands' difficulties by providing more support when their husbands were under greater levels of stress. Husbands, on the other hand, did not seem to respond as well to their wives' stress, as the increased negative behaviors wives perceived under conditions of stress may have undermined any positive support wives were reporting. Prior research has indicated that negative or conflictual behaviors under conditions of stress often have detrimental effects on well-being that are independent of and stronger than the beneficial effects of positive support (Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993). In particular, negative behaviors within a generally supportive close relationship may be especially threatening to well-being. Major, Zubek, Cooper, Cozzarelli, and Richards (1997) have found that positive support from a close other can buffer individuals from the detrimental effects of stress only when that close other is not also a source of conflict. When receiving both supportive behaviors and negative behaviors from a close other for a particular stressor, the recipient's experience of positive support does not seem to offset the adverse effects of those conflictual behaviors. To explain this finding, the authors postulated that the experience of negative behaviors within an otherwise positive relationship may be unexpected and, consequently, more salient. As a result, negative behaviors may be viewed as particularly diagnostic, and thus, they may play a larger role in individuals' adjustment to stressors than positive support does. In light of this prior research, husbands in the current study appeared more likely than wives to feel most supported on days when they were experiencing greater levels of stress.

It should be noted that the self-report nature of the diary data measures does make it difficult to ascertain whether husbands were not providing the best support (i.e., support without negative behaviors) when wives were under greater stress or whether wives were less able to accept their husbands' support in an efficacious

manner. In other words, perhaps when wives were under greater stress, they were simply less charitable in their perceptions of their husbands' behaviors. Some converging evidence, however, seems to support the former interpretation. First, if wives' perceptions of their husbands' behaviors were merely colored negative because of their increased stress level, one would not expect that wives would also report receiving more positive behaviors from their husbands while under stress. Second, results from the observational support data indicated that husbands were not rated as better support providers when their wives had more severe problems, which argues against the idea that husbands were behaving more positively when their wives were under stress, but wives were not duly acknowledging that behavior. Finally, prior research by Cutrona and Suhr (1994) has examined the influence of a wide variety of factors, including relationship evaluations, personality factors, and the actual support behaviors received (as rated by independent observers), on perceived spousal supportiveness. Results indicated that the most important determinant of wives' perceptions of support from their husbands was the actual supportive behaviors their husbands displayed during the support interactions, suggesting that wives' perceptions tend to be closely aligned with their husbands' behaviors. Together, these findings argue against the idea that wives are judging their husbands' behaviors more harshly when under stress.

Why do women respond more positively to a partner's changing stress level than do husbands? Put another way, why are husbands not providing the best support (i.e., support without negativity) to their wives at the critical times when wives presumably may need that support the most? One possible answer may involve the way spouses communicate their support needs to their partners. Some research suggests that spouses, particularly women, frequently rely on rather indirect strategies (e.g., simply describing the situation or emotional reactions to the problem) rather than direct strategies (e.g., specifically asking for help) when soliciting support from a partner (Cutrona, 1996). Given that women are generally reported to be more empathic (Eagly & Crowley, 1986) and better at reading nonverbal emotional expressions (Noller, 1980) than men, women may be better able to read indirect requests for help and thus more likely to provide support when a partner is under more stress. In other words, indirect support solicitation strategies may leave husbands unaware that their partners desire support. Nevertheless, several findings in the current studies suggest it was unlikely that husbands were simply not aware of their wives' changing stress level. At the between-subjects level, husbands were less supportive the more stress their wives were experiencing, whereas at the within-subject level, wives reported receiving more support and more negative behaviors as their stress increased. Thus, husbands did seem to be reacting to changes in their wives' stress; however, their reaction was to behave in an overall less helpful manner.

If husbands are sensitive to changes in their partners' support needs, what factors may be driving husbands' support provision? An alternative reason why wives responded more positively to their partner's difficulties than did husbands may involve spouses' appraisals of the support situation. Knowing a partner needs support and deciding to provide that support may represent two different processes (Cutrona, 1996). A spouse may decide to withhold support if he or she evaluates the stressor as trivial or as something the partner could have controlled or prevented. In fact, some evidence suggests that men are more likely to blame the

support seeker and tend to feel less sympathy for the support seeker than do women (MacGeorge, 2003). Similarly, perhaps husbands, more than wives, resent their role as support provider and thus act out these feelings of resentment by engaging in detrimental behaviors when providing support. Future research may want to examine whether husbands and wives tend to systematically differ in their attitudes toward support provision.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Our confidence in the results of this study is enhanced by a number of strengths in its methodology and design. Foremost among these was the use of both observational and self-report methods to assess support provision behaviors. The use of observational techniques in the first part of the study allowed us to control for the possibility that third variables, such as neuroticism or depression, may be affecting spouses' perceptions of their problem severity and the support they receive, thereby inflating the association between those variables. Furthermore, relying on multiple methods of support assessment ensured that the results are not contingent on a particular methodology. Second, we used within-subject analyses to examine the associations between stress and perceptions of spousal support over time. Within-subject analyses allowed for the estimation of the association between changes in stress and changes in support perceptions, controlling for spouses' stable tendencies to view their stress and their support in a particular manner. Third, in contrast to prior social support research that has relied almost exclusively on cross-sectional data, this study used both cross-sectional and longitudinal data. The addition of longitudinal data allowed us to examine support processes as they naturally wax and wane in marriage over the course of a week. Finally, also in contrast to much prior research that has addressed samples varying widely in marital duration, the analyses reported here examine data from a relatively homogeneous sample of couples, reducing the likelihood that the effects observed here result from uncontrolled differences in marital duration. In addition, the use of a fairly homogeneous sample provided a more conservative test of our hypotheses.

Despite these strengths, there are several limitations to the current study as well. First, the diary portion of the study relied on self-report measures to assess both stress and spousal support, which allow for the possibility that a third variable may account for the findings. However, as mentioned, the use of within-subject analyses allowed us to partial out spouses' idiosyncratic tendencies to view their stress and their support in a particular manner. Furthermore, additional analyses revealed that controlling for a number of possible third variables, such as general negative affectivity or depression, did not affect the pattern of results.

Second, as previously mentioned, the use of self-report measures in the diary portion of the study also makes it difficult to rule out the possibility that the pattern of results was obtained, not because husbands behaved poorly when wives were experiencing greater stress, but because wives' perceptions of their husbands' behaviors were colored by their heightened stress level. Though some evidence argues against this interpretation, further research is necessary to clarify this issue. For instance, future researchers may want to ask partners about the daily supportive and negative behaviors they provide to their spouses. In this way, the associa-

tion between spouses' stress and partners' reports of their own support provision could be examined.

Third, although our theory suggests that husbands' behaviors are a response to their wives' stress, these correlational data cannot rule out the alternative perspective that husbands' negative behaviors may lead to wives' stress. However, this interpretation seems less likely given the nature of the stress measure. Each of the stressors included in the diary were chosen to represent concrete, objective stressors that are unlikely to be a consequence of marital satisfaction. Spouses were then asked simply to indicate whether the event occurred rather than to give their subjective perceptions of the negativity of the event. This measure of stress makes it unlikely that negative behaviors from a partner would lead spouses to perceive more external stress in their lives. For instance, being criticized by a partner is unlikely to lead spouses to perceive that they had troubles with their transportation or that they encountered unexpected financial difficulties if these events did not actually occur. Similarly, whereas a heavy workload at one's job may lead to an argument with a partner, the reverse seems less likely to be true.

Though also an important strength of the current research, a final limitation involves the use of a relatively homogeneous sample of satisfied couples. Thus, generalizations to other samples should be made with caution. For instance, in less satisfied couples, increases in stress may be less likely to be associated with increases in spousal support. However, the fact that stress was significantly associated with wives' perceptions of negative behaviors even in this conservative sample of happy couples not only serves to enhance our confidence in these findings but also attests to the fact that even among the happiest of couples, spouses may not be receiving the best support during times of stress.

Implications for Future Research

The finding that men and women differ not in their ability to provide support but in their responsiveness to a partner's stress has at least three important implications for future research on support processes within relationships. First, these results highlight the importance of attending to the context in which relationship processes occur. As previously mentioned, observational studies assess spouses' basic skills in providing support without reference to the severity of the problem the partner is facing, whereas self-report studies of spousal support have tended to examine support within the context of the partner's specific stressful experiences. Clearly each of these methodologies provides valuable information about support processes in relationships. However, failing to emphasize the broader circumstances in which support processes are being studied may lead to misleading conclusions. By taking the context of support processes into account, the current studies suggest that prior findings of gender differences in self-report studies may have risen from the fact that the studies either examined the support given in response to a specific stressor or asked individuals to reflect on the general supportiveness of their partners. It seems likely that when asked to simply report on how supportive one's spouse is, individuals may remember times when their partners were and were not there for them when support was needed rather than think about their partner's basic skills in communicating support, regardless of the context.

Second, the current findings expand our understanding of what it means to be an effective support provider. Though many researchers have described support as being responsive to a partner's needs, traditionally, responsiveness has been defined as the skill with which individuals communicate such aspects as guidance, reassurance, and validation to their partners (Cutrona, 1996). Thus, most research and intervention programs on support provision have examined who possesses this skill (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2001) and how to teach individuals lacking in support abilities more positive communication skills to improve the quality of supportive exchanges (Cutrona, 1996). The current studies suggest that the ability to provide quality support to a partner and the ability to provide that support when partners are facing greater difficulties may be quite distinct. Future researchers on support provision may want to examine the factors that affect the quality of support provision as well as the factors influencing the timing of that provision. Likewise, once spouses have the basic skills necessary to provide positive support, those running social support training programs may want to help spouses become more sensitive to their partner's changing support needs over time. By taking both skill and responsiveness into account, a more comprehensive picture of support processes in relationships may emerge.

Finally, these findings indicate that the experience of stress may have greater effects on the personal and marital well-being of women than of men. Negative stressors, such as work stress or financial difficulties, not only can lead to lowered mental health (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989) but also may adversely affect spouses' marital evaluations, even within initially strong, satisfying marriages (Conger et al., 1999). Receiving support from a spouse during difficult times, however, may buffer well-being from the deleterious effects of negative stressors (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Conger et al., 1999; Repetti, 1989). Nevertheless, if husbands have the skills to support their wives, yet fail to adequately use these skills at the critical times when wives are faced with high levels of stress (e.g., by providing both support and negativity), wives may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing personal or relationship distress during times of stress. In fact, some research on daily stress and mood has found that the effects of stress on subsequent negative mood are stronger for wives than for husbands (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). In addition, in research on stress and marriage, Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, and Tochluk (1997) have found that whereas wives' depressive symptoms tend to be associated with future marital distress, this association is not significant for husbands. To explain this finding, the authors note that wives are more likely than husbands to increase their support provision when their partners are depressed (Pasch et al., 1997). Thus, husbands' depression may not lead to marital distress because wives are responding more positively to their husband's depressive symptoms. Finally, some evidence suggests that stressors external to the marriage may be more strongly associated with marital satisfaction for wives than for husbands. Neff and Karney (2004) examined the within-person association between changes in external stress and changes in marital satisfaction over 4 years of marriage. They found that for wives, but not for husbands, increases in stress were associated with decreases in evaluations of global marital satisfaction. These findings, coupled with evidence suggesting that spousal support (or a lack thereof) tends to be more closely linked to marital satisfaction for women than for men (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994)

and that a poor marriage may take a larger toll on wives' physical health than on husbands' physical health (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993), indicate that husbands' failure to be responsive to their wives' varying support needs may have important consequences for wives' health and marital quality.

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