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Objective and Subjective Workplace Social Support and Gender

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Abstract

Workplace social support is the amount and quality of relationships available to an employee. It is linked to stress reduction by directly reducing employees' strain (health or well-being) or by moderating between stressful working conditions and strain. Research on workplace social support has almost exclusively used nonexperimental field methods and survey data. It is not clear, however, how objective supportive behaviors might be perceived. We compared the two most commonly studied types of workplace support, emotional and instrumental, in a true experiment. We hypothesized that objectively manipulated emotional support would be perceived as emotional and objective instrumental support would be perceived as instrumental. Second, we hypothesized that emotional support would be seen as more caring than instrumental support. Third, we hypothesized that support from women would be seen as more effective (caring and beneficial) than support from men—but that there would also be a sex-appropriateness effect in which emotional support from women and instrumental support from men would be perceived as more caring and beneficial.

In a 2 x 2 design, 123 undergraduates viewed videos of either emotional or instrumental support by males or females following a stressful workplace event. They rated perceived emotional support, perceived instrumental support, caring shown by the support and how beneficial the support was.

ANOVAs found objective (video-taped) support was perceived as manipulated: Objective emotional support was rated as more emotional, and objective instrumental support was rated as more instrumental. Objective emotional and instrumental support were not differentially related to ratings of how caring or beneficial the support was, but perceived emotional support was rated as more caring, and perceived instrumental support was rated as more beneficial. The sex-of-support-provider by type-of-support interaction was not significant. In exploratory analyses, sex-of-support-provider and sex of receiver interacted; support from a same-sex provider was rated as more caring.

Research on workplace social support is important, but we know little about objective behaviors intended to be supportive. More information about objectively supportive behaviors is necessary in order to know how to implement behavioral intervention programs. More research can guide us to a concrete understanding about how to improve social support in the workplace.

Objective and Subjective Workplace Social Support and Gender

Social support is a function of the amount and quality of relationships available, and there is wide interest in social support as a means for reducing workplace stress. Research on work stress and social support has yielded weak and unclear findings, however (Beehr, Farmer & Glazer, 2003; Cohen & Wills, 1985). One reason may be that social support can be a variety of different things, two of the most commonly studied being emotional social support and instrumental social support. In addition, people may perceive social support differently, and characteristics of the source (provider) of social support may help determine its effectiveness.

Emotional support is an expression of sympathy and comfort that is helpful because it directly alleviates some of strains, the harmful psychological effects of stress (Lindorff, 2005). Instrumental support is defined as the giving of material resources, financial aid or needed services that may help to resolve the stressful event (Cohen and Wills, 1985). This may help in reducing stress by eliminating the problem (i.e., the stressor) that is causing strain, by providing the person with the resources needed to cope with the problem. It may not be only the objective behaviors of instrumental support that have the favorable effect on the stressed worker, however; it might instead matter whether support recipients felt the supportive person cared about them, in other words whether the support was perceived as emotional (Semmer, Elfering, Jacobshagen, Perrot, Beehr and Boos, 2006). Thus, perceptions of type of support provided are important, and yet we currently know little about how objectively supportive behaviors are perceived as supportive. It is important to learn how people perceive the nature and effectiveness of behaviors that are objectively emotionally or instrumentally supportive. We expect that instrumental and emotional support behaviors can be recognized for what they are, and so we hypothesized that objectively manipulated instrumental support would be perceived by observers as instrumental,

and objectively manipulated emotional support would be perceived by observers as emotional support. Most research on social support in the work setting uses perceived measures of support, but it has never been shown whether the type of support offered can actually be identified and perceived correctly (i.e., is instrumental support be perceived as instrumental and is emotional support perceived as emotional).

It has been argued that emotional support is an expression of sympathy and empathy, and by its very nature, it suggests that the supportive person cares (Semmer et al., 2006). We hypothesized, therefore, that the provision of emotional support will be seen as more caring than the provision of instrumental support.

Sex of Support Source

Finally, we also examined the issue of sex of the support source. Women are often seen as more emotional, social, and interpersonally competent than men (Eagly and Crowley, 1986; Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2006), and this might mean that support from women, because it is more sex-appropriate than from men, will be perceived as more caring and effective. We therefore hypothesized that support provided by women will be seen as more effective than support from men.

In addition, sex may affect the way social support works and the type of support given. The sex of the provider of social support, that is the source person, might matter. In Western culture it is seen as more common, more appropriate, and therefore we suggest more effective, for women to provide emotional support than for men to provide it (Eagly and Crowley, 1986; Gonzalez-Morales, Peiro, Rodriguez, & Greenglass, 2006). Conversely, men may be culturally more expected to provide instrumental support. For this reason, the interaction of the gender of social support providers and the type of support given was examined. People often hold sex role

expectations, so that when others perform sex-typical behaviors they are seen as doing something expected and appropriate; when they perform sex-atypical behaviors, however, this might be seen as inappropriate. We hypothesized that when the social support behaviors are sex-appropriate by source (emotional support behaviors by women and instrumental support behaviors by men), the support behaviors will be seen as more caring and effective, but that when the social support behaviors are sex-inappropriate by source the supportive behaviors will not be seen as so helpful,

Method

We used a between-subjects 2 x 2 experimental design, randomly assigning participants to four conditions (viewing videotapes of emotional versus instrumental support episodes x male or female support providers in a simulated work setting).

Participants

One hundred twenty-three university students participated in this study. The participants were composed of 60 females and 63 males, with ages ranging from 18-30 ($M = 21$). Some participants enrolled in psychology courses were granted extra credit for participating. They were recruited by using the Psychology Department subject pool, contacting professors and recruiting from classrooms.

Stimulus materials

Participants were given a packet of papers that included a consent form and a short questionnaire (see Appendix). The experiment took place in a classroom and a computer laboratory. Each participant was provided with a chair, a writing utensil and a flat surface to write on. A computer was used, along with eight different short videos depicting different

examples of emotional or instrumental social support. Which video was shown varied according to the condition being tested.

Dependent variables

Participants were tested in groups of up to four and were randomly assigned to each condition. Each participant was assigned to one of the following conditions: 1, male helping male; 2, male helping female; 3, female helping male; or 4, female helping female. First, participants were shown a short video depicting one of two different situations in a workplace setting in which emotional social support or instrumental social support was provided. Then participants completed a questionnaire, rating the degree to which the video depicted emotional support and instrumental support, and two measures we conceived as support effectiveness (i.e., support showing caring and support judged as beneficial). They were asked to rate how instrumental or emotional the social support was using an adapted version (adapted to refer to the video-tape) of five-point scale from Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman, and Lazarus (1987) and Lindorff (2000). We constructed the beneficial and caring items ourselves. At the end of the experiment, participants were debriefed on what the researcher was testing, were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and were encouraged to contact the researcher in the future if interested in the outcomes of the research.

Results

Regarding the first hypothesis, that observers can correctly perceive the type of support that is offered, videotaped instrumental support was perceived as more instrumental than videotaped emotional support, $t(123) = 7.17, p < .01$, and videotaped emotional support was perceived as more emotional than videotaped instrumental support, $t(123) = -7.64, p < .01$

(Table 1.) Thus, objective behaviors that fit the definitions of emotional or instrumental support are perceived as emotional or instrumental, respectively, supporting the hypothesis.

We also hypothesized that emotional support would be perceived as more as acts of caring than would instrumental support. Manipulated type of support was not related, however, to ratings that the support illustrate caring, not supporting the hypothesis. Regarding *perceptions* of support, both perceived instrumental support and perceived emotional support were positively correlated with ratings that support was *beneficial*, although the relationship for instrumental support was stronger ($r = 0.26, p < 0.01$ versus $r = 0.16, p < 0.05$). Perceived emotional support was more strongly related, however, to perceptions that the supportive person *cared* ($r = .39, p < 0.01$) than was perceived instrumental support ($r = .17, p = .056$). Thus the hypothesis was supported by perceived support and not by objective support.

The third hypothesis was that sex-appropriate support by source would be seen as more caring and beneficial than sex-inappropriate support. That is, emotional support from women and instrumental support from men would be seen as more effective than their opposites. This was not the case, however, as the interaction between type of support and sex of support source in a 2 x 2 ANOVA was not significant, $F(1,119) = 2.11, p = .15$ for caring and $F(1,119) = 2.50, p = .12$ for benefit.

The final hypothesis was that support would be seen as more appropriate and therefore as more effective when provided by women. This was not supported, however, as sex of support giver was not related to either the perceived degree of caring or of benefit. Instead, the sex of the support provider and sex of support receiver interacted to predict perceived caring (but not perceived benefit), $F(1,119) = 4.10, p < 0.05$ (Figure 1). Perceived caring was greater when the

sex of the support provider and the sex of the support receiver was the same than when they were different.

Discussion

Research about social support in the workplace is important because of its potential to alleviate the harmful effects of occupational stress. The present study followed the suggestion of Beehr (1995) to examine perceptions of support in relation to objectively supportive behaviors via the use of videotapes. Observers can recognize and distinguish behaviors that are objectively emotional and objectively instrumental. This suggests that workplace emotional and instrumental support as measured in nonexperimental survey research may be related to objective workplace behaviors or supportive others. Perceptions of workplace social support are often studied in the occupational stress literature, but the present study shows that such perceptions are related to episodes of objectively supportive behaviors.

Nevertheless, perceived support is more strongly related to beliefs in its effectiveness than are objectively supportive behaviors. This is consistent with theories about the importance of perceptions in employees' reactions to stress situations (e.g., appraisals; Semmer et al., 2006). It is discouraging, however, regarding the potential for implementing successful interventions training people in ways to provide social support. Objectively provided support may not be seen as beneficial. The trick may be to get the support receivers to perceive the behaviors as supportive, and although there is a relationship between the objective and perceived supportive behaviors, there is enough slippage in that link so that the objective behaviors may not have their intended effect. .

It apparently does not matter whether emotional and instrumental support come from men or women. That is, either sex is likely to be seen as equally effective providing either type of

support. Males and females can apparently be as effective providing either type of support to their colleagues. An additional conclusion regarding sex of support provider is that women may not be seen as more effective, contrary to our expectations. Their support is not seen as more caring nor as more beneficial overall than support from men, in spite of a supposed gender difference in social skills. Unexpectedly, however, support of both types from a male was seen as more effective (more caring) for male recipients, and support from a female was seen as more caring when received by female recipients. This could be due to a “like me” phenomenon, in which it is assumed that people who are similar (same sex in this case) and who try to help actually care more than people who are different from the help recipient.

More research on this topic can guide us to a more concrete, clearer understanding about what social support is and how to improve and implement social support in the workplace.

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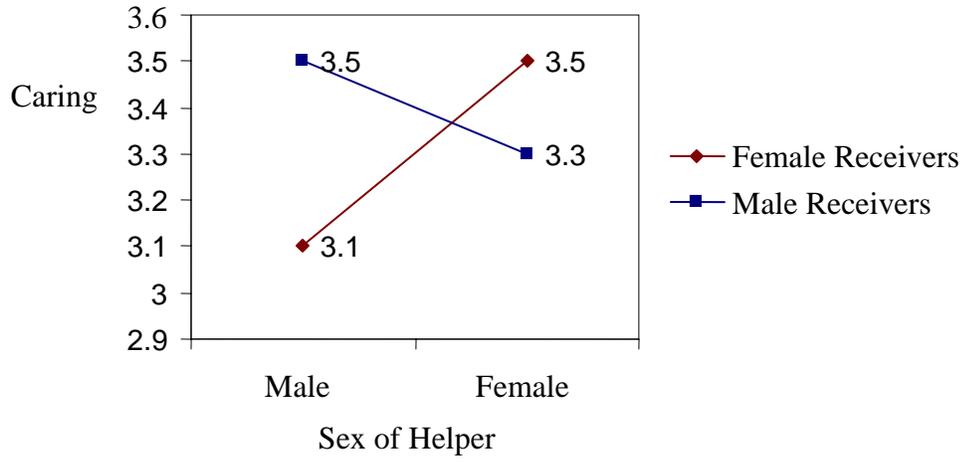
Table 1

Means of Perceived Instrumental and Emotional Support by Manipulation (Videos) of Instrumental and Emotional Support (N = 123)

<u>Perceived Support</u>	<u>Manipulated Support</u>			
	<u>Instrumental</u>		<u>Emotional</u>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Instrumental Support	3.90	0.91	2.44	0.99
Emotional Support	2.57	1.00	3.82	0.90

Figure 1. Perceived Caring by Gender of the Helper and of Receiver

Figure 1



Appendix

■ Workplace Interactions ■

With this situation in mind please answer the next two questions by circling your answer:

During the video you watched, to what extent did one employee give **tangible** assistance to help the distressed employee solve a problem in the situation?

- | | | | | |
|------------|----------|----------|--------------|-------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Not at all | A little | Somewhat | A great deal | A very great deal |

During the video you watched, to what extent did one employee give **emotional** assistance to help the distressed employee solve a problem in the situation?

- | | | | | |
|------------|----------|----------|--------------|-------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Not at all | A little | Somewhat | A great deal | A very great deal |

To what extent did the employee make you feel he or she **actually cared** about the distressed employee's situation?

- | | | | | |
|------------|----------|----------|--------------|-------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Not at all | A little | Somewhat | A great deal | A very great deal |

Using the scale below, rate each situation in regard to how much the distressed employee **benefited** or was **harmed** by the interaction:

- | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------|----------------|
| Benefited greatly | Benefited | Slightly benefited | Had no effect | Slightly harmed | Harmed | Greatly harmed |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Your Age: _____

Your Gender: **M** **F**