

Research Report

The Paradox of Received Social Support

The Importance of Responsiveness

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ABSTRACT—*Although the perception of available support is associated with positive outcomes, the receipt of actual support from close others is often associated with negative outcomes. In fact, support that is “invisible” (not perceived by the support recipient) is associated with better outcomes than “visible” support. To investigate this paradox, we proposed that received support (both visible and invisible) would be beneficial when it was responsive to the recipient’s needs. Sixty-seven cohabiting couples participated in a daily-experience study in which they reported on the support they provided and received each day. Results indicated that both visible and invisible support were beneficial (i.e., associated with less sadness and anxiety and with greater relationship quality) only when the support was responsive. These findings suggest that the nature of support is an important determinant of when received support will be beneficial.*

Paradoxically, received support (the receipt of actual support from others) is often unrelated to outcomes, or worse, associated with negative outcomes (e.g., Kaul & Lakey, 2003). Receiving support may lower one’s self-esteem or draw more attention to the problem, or the support received may not be skilled (e.g., Shrout, Herman, & Bolger, 2006). Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler’s (2000) work suggested that “invisible” support may minimize these pitfalls. They found that invisible support (i.e., support that the provider reported enacting, but the recipient did not report receiving) was associated with less depression and anxiety than visible support (support that the recipient reported receiving). Recent work shows considerable variability in this effect (Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008), and we suggest

that one important factor is the *perceived responsiveness* of support transactions.

An individual perceives responsiveness when his or her partner understands, validates, and cares for the self (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Many relationship theories regard perceived responsiveness as a central aspect of satisfying relationships (Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007), and researchers have conceptualized social support in similar terms (Cutrona, 1996). Accordingly, we predicted that, if the support is intended to be or perceived to be high in responsiveness, then both visible and invisible support should relieve distress; however, support that is low in responsiveness should not relieve distress. We predicted that the recipient of support would report the worst outcomes when both partners agree that low responsiveness occurred.

Perceived responsiveness is often thought to represent a global view of one’s partner; however, it can also be applied to specific situations. Researchers have examined perceived responsiveness after discussions between partners in the lab (Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008; Manne et al., 2004) and in daily diary studies (e.g., Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Responsiveness in reaction to specific disclosures and events may be the central route through which one’s global perception of responsiveness is formed.

METHOD

Sixty-seven heterosexual, cohabiting couples completed the study. Their mean age was 25.16 years ($SD = 6.33$), and their mean years living together was 1.80 years ($SD = 2.46$); 23.9% were married. Participants first came to the lab for a 1-hr intake session, during which they answered background questions.¹ Each night before going to bed, participants completed a brief questionnaire. Participants placed the completed form in an

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¹The data were part of a larger study. We discuss only relevant measures.

envelope, sealed the envelope, and stamped the date and time across the seal using an electronic stamp with a security-coded lock (Fuligni & Hardway, 2006). After 14 days, participants completed a brief exit measure, were debriefed, and received \$30.

Daily Responsiveness

Participants were asked whether they had shared a negative event with their partner that day. Participants only reported events that happened outside of their relationship (e.g., at work), and not events that happened in the relationship (e.g., a conflict). If participants did not share a personal concern with their partner that day, they were instructed to select “N/A = Did not talk about this.” Participants who shared an event during the day were asked to rate their agreement with three statements, adapted from Reis’s (2003) responsiveness measure, about their partner’s response: “My partner understood me,” “My partner made me feel like he/she valued my abilities and opinions,” and “My partner made me feel cared for”; participants gave their responses on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). These three ratings were averaged together to form a composite score ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.00$).

Participants were also asked to rate their agreement with the statement “Today, when my partner told me about a concern he/she has . . .” followed by the same three phrases (e.g., “I tried to understand my partner”). These three ratings were averaged together to form a composite score ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.86$). Using these two measures, we could match up reports from the partners for each day regarding whether or not support was provided. Ratings of responsiveness were thus only reported on days when a negative event was shared.

Daily Mood

Participants rated how closely their present mood matched adjectives from scales such as the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). The “sad affect” composite included *hopeless*, *worthless*, *sad*, *dejected*, and *disappointed* ($\alpha = .82$, $M = 1.44$, $SD = 0.62$). The “anxious affect” composite included *anxious*, *stressed*, *upset*, and *scared* ($\alpha = .72$, $M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.78$).

Relationship Quality

Two scales were used for relationship quality. “Relationship connectedness” consisted of four items, such as “I felt out of touch and disconnected from my partner” (reverse-scored). Participants rated their agreement with these items on a 5-point scale (1 = *very little or not at all*, 5 = *very much*; $\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.87$). “Relationship security” consisted of four items, such as “I felt that my partner was very trustworthy.” Participants rated their agreement using the same scale ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.71$). Several researchers have noted the differences between feeling connected and satisfied and feeling

safe and secure in one’s relationship (e.g., satisfaction and trust predicting different outcomes; Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001), and we kept these scales separate to reflect this differentiation.

RESULTS

Couples completed an average of 13.19 days out of 14 ($SD = 1.67$ days). Participants shared concerns on approximately 7.56 days ($SD = 3.76$ days).

Data Analysis Strategy

We used three-level hierarchical linear modeling (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). We collapsed the results across gender because there was only one significant gender difference, which is noted. We divided the days into four categories: days when both participants reported that support had been provided (*both-reported-support days*; $n = 683$), days when neither participant reported that an event had been shared, and no support was provided (*no-sharing days*; $n = 538$), days when the participant perceived support but the partner did not report providing it (*perceived-support days*; $n = 337$), and days when the participant did not perceive support but the partner reported providing it (*invisible-support days*; $n = 318$).

Replication of Previous Findings

We first attempted to replicate the finding that invisible support was associated with less sadness and anxiety than visible support (Bolger et al., 2000). We used the no-sharing days as the comparison category because these days likely represent days when no support was needed (i.e., neither partner reported that a negative event had been shared). Analyses controlled for previous days’ outcome of interest.

As predicted, visible-support days were associated with significantly greater sadness than were no-sharing days. We found this effect for the two types of visible support days (perceived-support and both-reported-support days). Also as predicted, invisible-support days were associated with only a marginally significant increase in sadness (see Table 1 for all results). Similarly, visible-support days were associated with greater anxious affect than were no-sharing days. However, as predicted, invisible-support days were not associated with greater anxious affect. These basic findings for sad and anxious affect replicate the invisible-support findings of Bolger et al. (2000).

In terms of relationship connectedness, visible support was significantly associated with decreased connectedness. Invisible support was not associated with a significant decrease in connectedness. Finally, there was a marginally significant decrease in relationship security (only for women) when both partners reported that support had been provided, but there was not a significant decrease when the participant perceived it but the partner did not report providing it (i.e., the support was only perceived). As predicted, invisible support was not associated

TABLE 1
Estimates of Daily Outcomes Based on Type of Support Day

Type of day	Daily outcome			
	Sad affect	Anxious affect	Relationship connectedness	Relationship security
No sharing ^a	1.06*** (0.074)	1.28*** (0.060)	3.28*** (0.185)	2.99*** (0.217)
Both reported support ^b	1.36*** (0.049)	1.73*** (0.060)	3.15* (0.056)	2.92 ⁺ (0.037)
Perceived support ^b	1.19*** (0.032)	1.52*** (0.053)	3.16* (0.058)	2.96 (0.041)
Invisible support ^b	1.12 ⁺ (0.032)	1.35 (0.054)	3.23 (0.057)	2.94 (0.046)

Note. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Both-reported-support days are those on which the support recipient and the support provider both reported the support. Perceived-support days are those on which only the support recipient reported the support. Invisible-support days are those on which only the support provider reported the support. Estimates were derived from hierarchical linear modeling coefficients. All analyses controlled for the previous day's score on the outcome of interest.

^aSignificance tests on the intercept tested whether the intercept was significantly different from zero; *df* for all intercepts = 66.

^bSignificance tests on the slopes tested whether the slope was significantly different from the intercept; *df* for sad-affect slopes = 1565, *df* for anxious-affect slopes = 1573, *df* for relationship-connectedness slopes = 1575, *df* for relationship-security slopes = 1573.

⁺*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ****p* < .001.

with decreased relationship security. In short, for relationship outcomes, invisible support was not associated with negative outcomes, but visible support often was associated with negative outcomes.

Effects of Responsiveness

Next we tested our main hypotheses, which predicted that responsiveness would be what matters in both visible and invisible support. We conducted a mean split;² days that were below the mean were labeled “low-responsiveness days,” and days that were at or above the mean were labeled “high-responsiveness days.”

Perceived-Support Days

On days when the participant perceived support, but the partner did not report providing it (i.e., perceived-support days), low responsiveness was associated with significantly more sadness than no-sharing days (see Table 2). However, high responsiveness was not associated with increased sadness. For anxious affect, both low and high responsiveness on perceived-support days were associated with greater anxious affect than on no-sharing days. However, low responsiveness was associated with significantly more anxious affect than high responsiveness on perceived-support days. Low responsiveness was associated with significantly decreased relationship connectedness and security, whereas high responsiveness was associated with significantly increased connectedness and security. Differences between low and high responsiveness were significant for all outcomes.

Invisible-Support Days

On the days when the participant did not perceive support but the partner reported providing it (i.e., invisible-support days),

the results also supported our hypotheses (see Table 2). For the outcomes of sad and anxious affect, high responsiveness was associated with no change relative to no-sharing days (the usual invisible-support finding). However, low responsiveness was associated with increased sadness and marginally increased anxious affect. Differences between high and low responsiveness were significant for both outcomes. If the invisible support was high in responsiveness, the support recipient experienced no change in relationship connectedness or security. However, if the invisible support was low in responsiveness, the support recipient reported significantly decreased connectedness and marginally decreased security. The difference between high and low responsiveness was significant for connectedness and marginally significant for security. In short, the invisible-support effect was observed only for highly responsive support: If the partner enacted invisible support that was low in responsiveness, the support recipient had worse outcomes.

Both-Reported-Support Days

Finally, we predicted that low responsiveness reported by both partners would be associated with the poorest outcomes. We ran a model that compared each type of response (high perceived/high intended, low perceived/high intended, high perceived/low intended, low perceived/low intended) to no-sharing days. The critical test was a planned contrast that compared the low-perceived/low-intended days to the other three types of days. When both the participant and partner perceived and reported providing low-responsive support, the participant reported more sadness, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,018) = 12.64, p < .001$, and less relationship connection, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,021) = 59.50, p < .001$, and security, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,019) = 19.11, p < .001$, than days when at least one person (the participant or the partner) reported receiving or giving high responsiveness (the contrast for anxious affect was not significant). The results for sadness are shown in Figure 1; the results for relationship connectedness are shown in Figure 2. As predicted, for the three significant contrasts, the

²A median split yielded an identical cut of the data. Continuous measures also yielded the same results, but they do not allow for all of the specific comparisons we wanted to illustrate here.

TABLE 2
Associations Between Outcomes and Low and High Perceived or Intended Responsiveness on Perceived-Support Days and Invisible-Support Days

Outcome and level of responsiveness	Perceived-support days (<i>b</i>)	Invisible-support days (<i>b</i>)
Sad affect ^a		
Low responsiveness	0.23*** (0.051)	0.14* (0.053)
High responsiveness	0.02 (0.033)	-0.01 (0.036)
Anxious affect ^b		
Low responsiveness	0.32*** (0.056)	0.13 ⁺ (0.067)
High responsiveness	0.15* (0.068)	-0.01 (0.055)
Relationship connectedness ^c		
Low responsiveness	-0.43*** (0.086)	-0.23** (0.081)
High responsiveness	0.17** (0.059)	0.06 (0.060)
Relationship security ^d		
Low responsiveness	-0.21*** (0.055)	-0.14 ⁺ (0.072)
High responsiveness	0.09* (0.044)	0.00 (0.053)

Note. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Perceived-support days are those on which the participant perceived support, but the partner did not report providing it. Invisible-support days are those on which the participant did not perceive support, but the partner reported providing support. Thus, low and high responsiveness refer to the level of perceived responsiveness in the case of perceived-support days and the level of intended responsiveness in the case of invisible-support days. All analyses controlled for the previous day's score on the outcome of interest.

^aThe difference between low and high responsiveness was significant for perceived-support days, $\chi^2(1, N = 719) = 13.87, p < .001$, and invisible-support days, $\chi^2(1, N = 679) = 5.66, p < .05$. ^bThe difference between low and high responsiveness was significant for perceived-support days, $\chi^2(1, N = 720) = 5.80, p < .05$, and invisible-support days, $\chi^2(1, N = 683) = 4.41, p < .05$. ^cThe difference between low and high responsiveness was significant for perceived-support days, $\chi^2(1, N = 718) = 59.14, p < .001$, and invisible-support days, $\chi^2(1, N = 683) = 10.73, p < .01$. ^dThe difference between low and high responsiveness was significant for perceived-support days, $\chi^2(1, N = 718) = 25.11, p < .001$, and marginally significant for invisible-support days, $\chi^2(1, N = 683) = 3.17, p < .10$. ⁺ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

worst scenario was when both the support provider and support recipient reported low responsiveness.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the paradoxical finding that receiving support from a partner is not always associated with positive outcomes. We proposed that perceived responsiveness is the key to understanding when received support will be beneficial because it ameliorates the potential negative aspects of receiving social support. We also hypothesized that examining perceived responsiveness would shed light on when visible and invisible support would be beneficial.

We investigated these hypotheses by examining reports from both partners on everyday support transactions. First, we replicated the general findings on invisible support and found that visible support tended to be associated with negative outcomes (i.e., more negative affect, lower relationship quality). As pre-

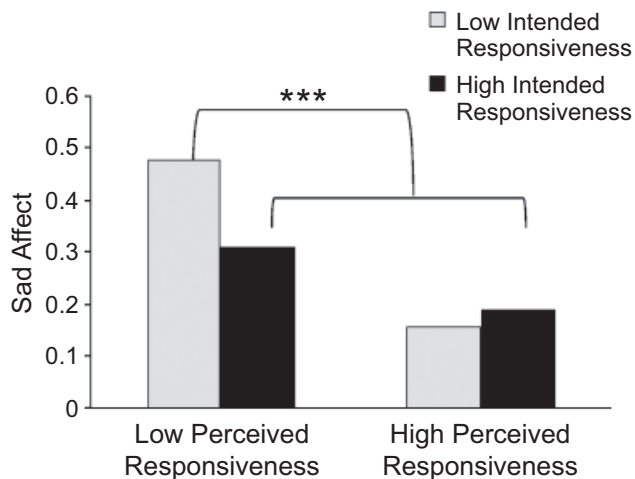


Fig. 1. Sad affect as a function of perceived responsiveness (report from the support recipient) and intended responsiveness (report from the support provider). A chi-square test was used to compare the days with low perceived and low intended responsiveness to all other days (** $p < .001$).

dicted, invisible support tended to not be strongly associated with these negative outcomes. Next, we examined how responsiveness changes these results. We found that visible support was associated with neutral or even positive outcomes when it was high in responsiveness, and invisible support was associated with negative outcomes if it was low in responsiveness. In other words, visible support was not always bad and invisible support was not always beneficial—responsiveness made a difference. Finally, interactions for the outcomes of sad affect, relationship connectedness, and relationship security revealed that the worst scenario is when both the support recipient and support provider agree the support was low in responsiveness. This interaction highlights the importance of considering reports from both partners.

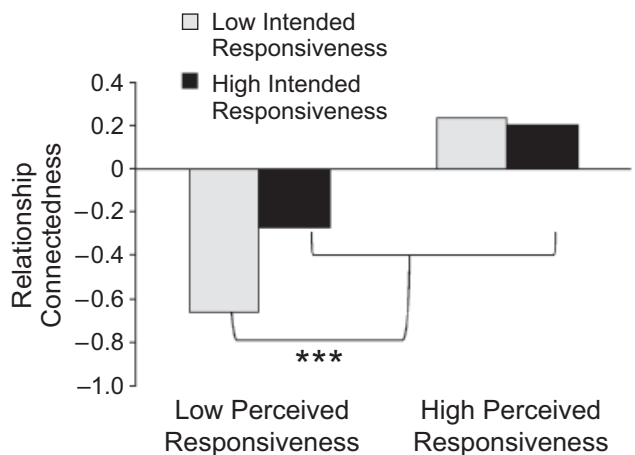


Fig. 2. Relationship connectedness as a function of perceived responsiveness (report from the support recipient) and intended responsiveness (report from the support provider). A chi-square test was used to compare the days with low perceived and low intended responsiveness to all other days (** $p < .001$).

Further studies could elaborate on limitations of the current study. Our no-sharing days could be days when participants did not experience a negative event or days when participants experienced a negative event but did not share it with their partners. We propose that the former is more likely, because participants reported greater anxiety on sharing days compared to no-sharing days even when participants reported high responsiveness (i.e., no-sharing days were not very anxiety provoking). If indeed these were days when nothing bad happened, then our findings are especially interesting because participants got a boost in relationship quality when their partners were responsive to their disclosures compared to days when everything was fine.

It is also possible that psychological distress could drive the amount or quality of the support provided: Individuals who felt sad and anxious on a given day could report that their partners were less responsive. However, additional analyses supported our hypothesized direction of effects: We found that the previous day's affect did not predict the likelihood of disclosing a negative event the next day, nor did it predict the next day's perceived or intended responsiveness. Also, the previous day's affect was controlled in our main analyses, so that we were examining the effects of responsiveness above and beyond how sad and anxious the person was feeling as recently as the previous night. Additionally, Seidman, Shrout, and Bolger (2006) examined whether the association between received support and increased distress might be spurious (i.e., that greater distress increases support provision, or that the negative event causes both distress and support). Through computer simulations, they found that these spurious associations were very unlikely.

Another important future direction would be to examine what actually happens on days when partners disagree about the support provision. Perceived-support days could be caused by several different scenarios; for example, support providers may have forgotten about the conversation or not labeled their behavior support, or the support recipient's perceptions may have been influenced by general relationship factors (e.g., Kaul & Lakey, 2003). Similarly, invisible support could include exchanges that happen outside of the support recipient's awareness or support that is so skillful it is "not coded as enacted support" (Bolger et al., 2000, p. 959).

Although perceived responsiveness is seen as a general tendency to see one's partner as being understanding, validating, and caring, partners can also be responsive to specific disclosures on a day-to-day basis. These day-to-day reactions may be one way that a general sense of responsiveness grows over time. Responsiveness to a partner's needs when providing support can help buffer against potential costs of receiving social support and may increase the sense that one's partner is available and supportive.

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