Receiving and giving support: Effects on relationships and well-being

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RESEARCH REPORT

Receiving and giving support: effects on relationships and well-being

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ABSTRACT Sixty-five subjects reported amount of social support given and received, and satisfaction with relationships where support exchanges took place. Negative affect from relationships, psychological symptoms, and happiness were also measured. Multiple regression analyses showed that receiving and giving support was related to some negative feelings toward the relationships concerned. Receiving support was also related to inflated anxiety symptoms. Effects of receiving support on guilt and dependent feelings were moderated by relationship satisfaction. Effects of giving support on anxiety were also moderated by relationship satisfaction. Extraversion and satisfaction with relationships predicted happiness. There were some individual differences in support exchanges. Extraverts gave more support. Women received more support whereas conscientious people received less.

Introduction

Being helped is often rewarding, and leads to positive affect towards the helper. There is extensive evidence of the benefits for health, mental health and happiness from various kinds of social support—instrumental, emotional and companionship (Sarason et al., 1990; Veiel, 1992). On the other hand there is growing evidence that helping can lead to negative reactions, especially when it suggests the incompetence of the recipient, reducing his or her autonomy, or can't be reciprocated in any way. It has been suggested that there is a 'dark side' to helping, i.e. that people sometimes help primarily to enhance their self-esteem (Fisher, Nadler & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982). It is found that seeking support is risky, because of the possible costs involved, and requires special skills (Goldsmith & Parks, 1990). It has been found that such negative reactions are absent when one group cooperates with, rather than helping another group (Worchel, Wing & Scheltema, 1989).

Giving support can be a source of positive effect (Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976). There may be satisfaction in being able to help a loved one, or in one's own superior competence. On the other hand giving help can be tiring and emotionally exhaust-
ing. Those in the medical and helping professions, and administrators who have to deal with many people, sometimes suffer from ‘burn-out’ (Maslach & Jackson, 1982). The same can happen in everyday life with others who are very demanding, physically or emotionally.

The mainstream social support research has been largely biased towards studying its positive, beneficial aspects on well-being, although there is some general recognition in the literature that both under-benefiting and over-benefiting in social support are related to negative affects (La Gaipa, 1990). Over-benefiting, i.e. receiving too much support is linked to feelings of dependence and guilt. Under-benefiting, i.e. giving too much support is linked to feelings of burden and frustration. Therefore, we intend to empirically test the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1.** Amount of help received and given will correlate with negative affect.

However, the balance between help given and help received may be important. Equity theory states that people are more satisfied with relationships where their balance of inputs and outputs is like that of their partners (Hatfield *et al.*, 1979). There is evidence for a norm of reciprocity, so that partners in a relationship would be expected to reward each other equally. Unfortunately, there has been no consensus on how to operationalize and measure the construct of reciprocity, nor its role in well-being (Van Tilburg *et al.*, 1991). Nevertheless, the idea of taking into account the relationship context in studying social support is inspiring. Research has pointed out that in ‘communal’ relationships, like love, those concerned do not keep track of rewards or costs to themselves, but are more concerned with the needs of the other (Clark & Reis, 1988). One of the central features of romantic love is intense concern for the other’s welfare. In family life the members look after each other’s biological welfare (Argyle, 1991).

We have also noticed that in satisfying relationships such negative reactions to social support may occur less, since help is normal, and indeed a sign of the other’s attachment (Argyle & Henderson, 1985). Hence, relationship satisfaction may indeed act as a promising buffer to negative effects incurred through support exchange.

**Hypothesis 2.** The negative effects of receiving and giving help will be moderated by relationship satisfaction.

So far the majority of studies on social support have focused on the effects of various kinds of support. We need more information about characteristics of the recipient, the provider, and the setting that may determine whether effective support is provided. The recipient’s willingness to seek support, and the provider’s skills in offering support might be two such determinants. For example, conscientious people may hesitate in seeking support, therefore receive less support. ‘Conscientiousness’ is one of the ‘big five’ personality factors identified by Norman (1963), and Costa & McCrae (1985). In a recent study with Canadian students, Little *et al.* (in press) found that it was the best predictor of the five of success with personal projects, including interpersonal ones. On the other hand, sociability, assertiveness, ability to empathize with others, positive attitudes towards others,
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Competent social skills may be directly relevant to successful support transaction (Heller & Swindle, 1983; Hansson, Jones & Carpenter, 1984; Sarason, Sarason, Hacker & Basham, 1985). Extraversion is a personality trait which captures nearly all these qualities.

**Hypothesis 3.** Conscientious people generally receive less support, while extroverts both give and receive a high level of support.

**Method**

**Subjects**

Sixty-five adults from the general population recruited by Oxford Subject Panel took part in this study. There were roughly equal numbers of males and females, ages ranging from 19 to 60. However, the men were slightly older than the women (mean ages 39.9 and 31.5 respectively).

**Questionnaires**

The inventory of questionnaires completed by subjects contained:

- **Social Support** was measured in two parts receiving and giving support.
  1. 'How much social support have you received in the past six months?' This was measured by asking subjects to check a 17-item Inventory of Socially Supportive Behavior (Barrera, 1981), which included all forms of social support, e.g. emotional support, tangible support, information support and companionship. Subjects also indicated frequency of receiving each supportive behaviour on 0-3 scales. A total score was computed to indicate amount of received support.
  2. 'How much social support have you given to other people in the past six months? This was measured by the same questionnaire as described in (1), and again, a total score was computed to indicate amount of given support.

- **Negative affect from relationships** were measured on the following four dimensions: feelings of 'burdened', 'frustrated', 'guilt', and 'dependent'. Subjects rated frequency of experiencing each negative affect on 1-5 scales ('1'='seldom', '5'='very often').

- **Psychological symptoms** were measured by the Depression and Anxiety subscales in the Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire (MHQ) (Crown & Crisp, 1979).

- **Happiness** was measured by the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI) (Argyle, Martin & Crossland, 1989).

- **Stress** was measured by a 20-item checklist adopted from the Social readjustment rating scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). A total score of perceived severity of life events experienced was then calculated to indicate levels of stress.

- **Satisfaction with relationships** was measured in two parts:
  1. 'Are you satisfied with relationships with people from whom you have received support?'
  2. 'Are you satisfied with relationships with people to whom you have given support?' Subjects rated each of them on 0-5 scales ('1'='very unsatisfied', '5'='very satisfied').

- **Conscientiousness** was measured by the G factor in 16PF (Cattell, 1950).

- **Extroversion** was measured by the E scale in the EPQ (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975).
Results

Descriptive statistics

We begin with simple statistics examining the discrepancy between reports of receiving and giving support. Subtracting receiving support from giving support, only 19.2% subjects reported receiving more support than they gave, whereas 80.8% reported giving more support than they received. These figures showed clearly that most people view themselves as support donors rather than recipients.

We also examined sex and age differences on support exchanges. Women reported receiving more support than men ($t=2.69$, $p<0.01$). Younger people ($<45$) also reported receiving more support than older people ($t=2.16$, $p<0.05$).

Predicting support exchange

Pearson correlation analysis showed that receiving support correlated negatively with conscientiousness ($r=0.26$, $p<0.05$). Giving support correlated positively with extroversion ($r=0.31$, $p<0.05$).

Hypothesis 3 was tested using multiple regression analysis, in which receiving and giving support were each regressed on sex, age and personality characteristics. When giving support was the criterion, extroversion alone was positively related to giving support ($R^2$ change $=0.10$, $p<0.05$).

When receiving support was the criterion, sex ($R^2$ change $=0.14$, $p<0.01$), stress ($R^2$ change $=0.08$, $p<0.05$), and conscientiousness ($R^2$ change $=0.08$, $p<0.05$) were significant predictors. Females and people who experienced higher levels of stress received more support, while conscientious people received less. These 3 predictors accounted for 30% of the total variance.

Predicting negative affect and well-being

We hypothesized that different support exchanges will elicit different dimensions of negative affect. Receiving support is related to feelings of guilt and dependence, while giving support is related to feelings of being burdened and frustrated. Indeed, zero-order correlations showed that receiving support positively correlated with feelings of dependence ($r=0.28$, $p<0.05$), whereas giving support positively correlated with feelings of frustration ($r=0.34$, $p<0.01$). In addition, receiving support positively correlated with anxiety symptoms ($r=0.40$, $p<0.001$).

Hypotheses 1 & 2 were tested using a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses. A combined score was computed for feeling burdened and frustrated, and another for feelings of guilt and dependence. These two scores were then used as criteria to be regressed on sex and age (Step 1); giving or receiving support (Step 2); satisfaction in relationships relevant to either giving or receiving support (Step 3); interactions between giving or receiving support and satisfaction with the relevant relationships (Step 4). The order and results of these two analyses are given in Table I.
### TABLE I. Predicting negative affect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$R^2$ change</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burdened:Frustrated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09*</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Giving support</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.25***</td>
<td>-0.81***</td>
<td>5.57***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Satisfaction (Giving)</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Support $\times$ Satisfaction (Giving)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.09*</td>
<td>0.25***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt/Dependence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>0.12***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>-0.61**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Receiving support</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.06*</td>
<td>0.36*</td>
<td>4.56**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Satisfaction (Receiving)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Plus (+) indicates a new step in the hierarchical regression analyses.
(2) The $B$ values are the unstandardized coefficients from the final regression equations, each term being corrected for all other terms.

$*=p<0.05$, $**=p<0.01$, $***=p<0.001$.

When feelings of being burdened and frustrated were the criteria, both giving support and satisfaction with relationships to whom support were given showed a positive relation. However, interaction between these two was insignificant. In other words, relationship satisfaction did not have a moderating effect on negative affect associated with giving support.

When feelings of guilt and dependence were criteria, both receiving support and satisfaction with relationships from which support were received showed a positive relation. Moreover, interaction between these two was also significant. In other words, relationship satisfaction had a moderating effect on negative affect associated with receiving support. At a higher level of receiving support, relationship satisfaction did not seem to matter much; at a lower level of receiving support, people who were unsatisfied with relationships had greater negative affect than those who were satisfied with relationships. This interaction is shown in Figure 1.

Since receiving support correlated with anxiety symptoms, as reported earlier, we also performed a hierarchical regression using anxiety as criterion. It is plausible that people may have received a lot of support, because they had experienced a lot of stress. Therefore, stress was controlled before testing effects of support exchanges. The order of entry of variables was: (1) sex and age; (2) stress; (3) receiving and giving support; (4) satisfaction with relationships, both receiving and giving; (5) interactions between corresponding pairs of predictors in (3) and (4). Results are presented in Table II.
Demographic variables and stress did not have significant effects on anxiety. Satisfaction with relationships did not have main effect either. However, receiving support had a main effect on anxiety, but did not interact with satisfaction. Giving support had no main effect but interacted significantly with satisfaction. At a higher level of giving support, people who were satisfied with relationships involved had fewer anxiety symptoms. The trend was reversed when the level of giving support was lower. The interaction is plotted in Figure 2.

Finally, we also conducted a hierarchical regression predicting happiness. The order of entry of variables was similar to that outlined while predicting anxiety. In addition, personality characteristics, namely extroversion and conscientiousness were also entered at the final step in regression. Results are presented in Table III.

Demographic variables, stress, and amount of support given and received did not contribute significantly to happiness. Relationship satisfaction did not show interactive effects either. However, satisfaction with relationships (where social support was received) had a main effect on happiness. Not surprisingly, extroversion also contributed significantly to happiness.
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TABLE II. Predicting anxiety symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$R^2$ change</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Stress</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Receiving support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving support</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Satisfaction (Receiving)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction (Giving)</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.25***</td>
<td>-0.81***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Support $\times$ Satisfaction (Receiving)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support $\times$ Satisfaction (Giving)</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.09*</td>
<td>-0.96*</td>
<td>3.30**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Plus (+) indicates a new step in the hierarchical regression analyses.
(2) The $B$ values are the unstandardized coefficients from the final regression equations, each term being corrected for all other terms.

$\star = p < 0.05$, $\star\star = p < 0.01$, $\star\star\star = p < 0.001$.

TABLE III. Predicting happiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$R^2$ change</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Stress</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Receiving support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving support</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Satisfaction (Receiving)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction (Giving)</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>-1.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Support $\times$ Satisfaction (Receiving)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support $\times$ Satisfaction (Giving)</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Extraversion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>-1.48</td>
<td>3.99***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Plus (+) indicates a new step in the hierarchical regression analyses.
(2) The $B$ values are the unstandardized coefficients from the final regression equations, each term being corrected for all other terms.

$\star = p < 0.05$, $\star\star = p < 0.01$, $\star\star\star = p < 0.001$.

Discussion

This study found support exchanges have a direct impact on relationships through negative affect. Receiving support is related to feelings of guilt and dependency. Giving support is related to feelings of burden and frustration. These results are clear evidence that receiving and giving support both have their dark sides and have
adverse effects on the relationships concerned. Exchanging support is a primary function of personal relationships. It also puts strain on both partners concerned, and thereby influencing their feelings towards the relationship.

A number of recent studies assessed negative social interactions and their associations with psychological distress and well-being (e.g. Finch, Okun, Barrera, Zautra & Reich, 1989). Dissatisfaction with relationships where support is received or given can be regarded as a narrower concept than ‘negative social interaction’. In the present study, dissatisfaction with relationships contributes to negative affect. Support exchanged within unsatisfying relationships make people more vulnerable to negative feelings.

In addition to the main effects of support given and received and relationship satisfaction, these two variables also interact when receiving support is concerned, and guilt and dependent feelings are criteria. When people receive a lot of support, its adverse effects in terms of guilt and dependent feelings are so salient that relationship satisfaction does not matter much. However, when support level is
lower, relationship satisfaction buffers the negative effects of receiving support. Support received from satisfying relationships causes less guilt and dependent feelings. This interaction reaffirms our assertion that the dynamics of social support will be better understood in the context of interpersonal relationships, including both cognitive appraisal (satisfaction) and affective dimensions.

As a convention, psychological symptoms are used as indices of psychological distress, and happiness as an index of subjective well-being. In this study, receiving support directly caused inflated anxiety symptoms. This finding extends the negative effects of receiving support from negative affect to minor psychological complaints. Why is receiving support not related to depression, a concept so closely linked with human helplessness? This is a question for further research.

Where giving support is concerned, satisfaction with relationships again interacts with giving support in predicting anxiety. When people give a lot of support, they are likely to be susceptible to negative feelings, such as frustration and burden. Fortunately, relationship satisfaction acts as a buffer. People who are satisfied with relationships where giving support takes place, are less inclined to have negative feelings. This interaction demonstrates that relationship satisfaction not only has a buffering effect on negative affects, such as guilt and dependency, but also has a buffering effect on psychological distress.

Relationship satisfaction is also a significant contributor to happiness. So is extroversion, which is repeatedly found in well-being research (e.g. Costa, McRae & Norris, 1981). The interesting point is that relationship satisfaction where receiving support is involved does not relate to extroversion. Hence, its impact on happiness is an independent one, rather than a result of extroverts’ active involvement in social activities and social networks (Argyle & Lu, 1990).

In this study, we have found some individual differences in support exchanges. Conscientious people receive less support, while extroverts give more support. Although these results make intuitive sense, the exact mechanism awaits further research.

Women receive more support than men. This might be because women actively seek more support in the wake of crises, or because they are usually more involved in social networks (Allan, 1989). Or, it might be because women have more intimate relationships than men (Reis, Senchak & Solomon, 1985), which generate more support for women.

In conclusion, the hypotheses outlined in the Introduction have been generally confirmed. Personality characteristics and gender are related to support exchanges. Receiving and giving support cause some negative feelings toward the relationships concerned. Receiving support is also related to inflated anxiety symptoms. Effects of receiving support on guilt and dependency feelings are moderated by relationship satisfaction. The effect of giving support on anxiety is moderated by relationship satisfaction. Finally, in addition to extroversion, satisfaction with relationships where support is received also contributes to happiness.

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