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## **Who Gives to Whom? Testing the Support Gap Hypothesis With Naturalistic Observations of Couple Interactions**

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# Who Gives to Whom? Testing the Support Gap Hypothesis With Naturalistic Observations of Couple Interactions

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We examined sex differences in explicitly supportive behavior exchanges between husbands and wives using naturalistic video-recordings of everyday couple interactions inside the home. Thirty dual-earner, middle class, heterosexual couples with school-age children were recorded in their homes over 4 days. Specific instances of face-to-face explicit couple support in the video-recordings were identified, and the support role assumed by each partner (recipient vs. provider), the method of support initiation (solicitations vs. offers), and the type of support (instrumental vs. emotional) in each interaction were coded. Paired samples *t* tests examined sex differences in husbands' and wives' supportive behavior, and bivariate correlations tested the associations among spouses' support initiation behaviors. Findings counter prior research that has largely found a "support gap" favoring husbands as support recipients. Instead, results indicate that wives received significantly more support of an instrumental nature from husbands (than husbands did from wives), a finding driven by wives' active support-soliciting behavior. Among husbands, a tendency to be the solicitor of support was positively correlated with a tendency to offer support. Within couples, rates of offers of support by 1 spouse were correlated with offers by the partner. Naturalistic observations highlight processes that may not be detected by self-reports or laboratory data, in an ecologically valid context in which social behavior reflects the natural rhythms and pulls of everyday life.

*Keywords:* social support, couples, sex differences, social interaction, naturalistic observation

I do a disproportional amount of all the house stuff . . . I work just as hard as him and I would like to come home with dinner on the table and the table set and when I'm done I'd like to push my chair back and get up like a pig and sit down in the living room and grab the remote . . . I get to be the hunter and the gatherer. And quite frankly if hunting were more lucrative, you wouldn't be needing to do this study because we wouldn't be a two parent family. So, if you're going to do it all, what do you need a partner for? Sometimes he becomes like another boy to take care of. And then on the other hand, he's another pair—even when I don't feel like the work is divided equally he, my husband, is still another pair of hands no matter what. It's not like he does nothing. He's just not doing enough.

—Wife and Mother, UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (2002)

The quote above illustrates a popular belief that is consistent with scientific theory about dyadic interpersonal processes in heterosexual couples: husbands receive more support (and more helpful support) from their wives than wives do from their husbands (e.g., Belle, 1982; Cutrona, 1996). This "support gap" has been attributed to a few factors, all rooted in basic assumptions about differences in the socialization of women and men (that men and women are socialized in different "gender cultures"). For example, social roles and self-construals are either more caring and interdependent (female) or more mastery-oriented and independent (male; e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997; Tannen, 1990), with implications for coping with challenge and stressors. Whereas men have been found to be more likely to engage in problem-solving, use instrumental support, and withdraw interpersonally to cope with stress, women are thought to preferentially engage in emotion-focused coping and draw on affiliative bonds in times of need (e.g., Cutrona, 1996; Matud, 2004; Taylor et al., 2000). Furthermore, studies of both younger (e.g., Burda, Vaux, & Schill, 1984) as well as older adults (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; McLaughlin, Vagenas, Pachana, Begum, & Dobson, 2010) have found that women typically have more support resources than men, in the form of bigger social networks as well as greater heterogeneity in those supportive relationships. Indeed, observations of differences in the size and nature of spouses' support networks in older adults are consistent with the idea that men turn to their wives as their primary (and sometimes only) source of support, whereas women enlist help from wider support networks with greater ease (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Phillipson, 1997).

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## Challenges to the Support Gap Hypothesis

There are shortcomings in the evidence for this support gap hypothesis. For example, scholars (MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004; Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Ickes, 2007) have noted that the idea of a support gap is based primarily on research done in nondyadic contexts or with nonromantic dyads. The generalizability of those findings to romantic relationships is questionable given the distinctive role played by romantic partners compared with other sources of social support (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986), and the significant influence of romantic relationships on the health and well-being of each member (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003). Reviews of the literature have also critiqued the largely anecdotal and qualitative nature of the data in lieu of direct tests of the hypothesized differences (see Burleson & Kunkel, 2006).

Perhaps the foremost limitation in research documenting a support gap is an overreliance on self-report methods compared to direct observations of supportive behaviors unfolding in real-time. Perceptions of social behavior are hampered by recall and response biases; additionally, these studies sometimes fail to uncover sex differences (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2005). Observations of supportive interactions in the laboratory challenge the support gap hypothesis. While some studies indicate that husbands *report* receiving significantly more support than wives do, support transactions *observed and coded* by researchers show no such differences in the amount of support provided and received between partners (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2005; Verhofstadt et al., 2007). Observational studies have either uncovered no sex differences in the amount of positive (e.g., reassures, gives helpful advice; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) or negative support behavior (e.g., criticizes, expresses negative affect; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Verhofstadt et al., 2007), or they have suggested that wives show more negative support behavior than do husbands (e.g., more criticizing, whining, or complaining; Pasch et al., 1997). A similar pattern emerges when examining different kinds of social support, including emotional support (i.e., the provision of warmth, nurturance, and reassurance to another person that he or she is valued and cared about) and instrumental support (i.e., the provision of tangible and practical assistance; House & Kahn, 1985). Specifically, while self-report data suggest differences in the kinds of support that are typically provided by men and women (e.g., women provide more emotional support and men provide more instrumental support; Burleson & Kunkel, 2006; Cutrona, 1996), observations made in laboratory settings have not found sex differences in the provision of either emotional support or instrumental support in couples (Verhofstadt et al., 2007). The striking inconsistency between self-report data and laboratory observations suggest a disjuncture between perception and behavior, and highlights the need for naturalistic observations of unstructured support interactions—to shed new light on an interpersonal process that is inextricably linked with marital satisfaction and dissolution (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Lavner & Bradbury, 2012; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998).

## Out of the Lab; Into the Home

Despite the enormous contribution of laboratory observation research to relationship science, its researcher-directed structure and physical confines isolate and remove dyadic processes from their natural contexts. Behavior is typically scrutinized in a simu-

lated and prompted environment that strips the interaction of its naturally occurring antecedents and consequences, affecting the very nature of the process under study. When instructed by researchers to engage in the sharing of a personal problem, as is typical in such support studies (Lawrence et al., 2008; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998), participants are *performing* prompted social behaviors. Although this approach permits the assessment of individual differences in the capacity to engage in particular behaviors, the observed interactions may differ from how, or even whether, they occur under natural circumstances. Indeed, in some studies, conflict discussions in the lab have been found not to map well onto conflict discussions at home (Gottman, 1979; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) or in seminatural settings (e.g., an “apartment laboratory”; Gottman & Driver, 2005), echoing findings from daily report studies that show differences in the kinds of emotion and behavior exhibited in public versus private spheres (e.g., at work vs. the home; Larson, Richards, & Perry-Jenkins, 1994). Thus, while laboratory observation studies have generated critical insights into relationship processes, they may also be missing some important elements that can be revealed through naturalistic observation.

Investigations of couple support processes typically include instructions that are biased to elicit emotional support (rather than instrumental support) interactions. For example, participants may be instructed to “talk about something you would like to change about yourself” (e.g., Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) or to identify a “personal problem” that they would like to address (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2005) that appears to prompt *support conversations of an emotional nature* rather than acts characteristic of instrumental support. The routine neglect of observations of instrumental support is significant. Indeed, prior work has found the largely unspoken and smooth routinized coordination between spouses in the management of household tasks to be critical to home life and well-being (Klein, Izquierdo, & Bradbury, 2007).

A remedy for the shortcomings of laboratory observation is to take the videocamera out of the lab and into the home to observe interpersonal process as it unfolds in situ (for a review of naturalistic observation methodology, see Repetti, Wang, & Sears, 2013). Naturalistic observations of support processes can contribute to the literature in ways not possible with laboratory observations—for example, by examining how *instrumental support* is exchanged in everyday settings, observing how patterns in the provision and receipt of support occur naturalistically in couples, and studying how support spontaneously arises through the efforts of both the support provider and the support recipient (instead of in response to researchers’ prompts).

## The Current Study

The current study uses a digital video archive of naturalistic family social interactions to investigate patterns of support behavior in a sample of dual-earner middle-class couples with school-age children. By adopting a fly on-the-wall perspective inside the home, this unique ethnographic dataset presents the opportunity to examine social behaviors and interactions in families as they naturally arise and take place amid the hustle and bustle of everyday family life. A growing number of studies have successfully used quantitative methods to leverage the power of this unique naturalistic observation archive, furthering scientific knowledge on

children's expressions of anger with family members (Sears, Repetti, Reynolds, & Sperling, 2014), the link between job stress and parents' social engagement with family members (Wang, Repetti, & Campos, 2011), and fluctuations in parents' positive and negative emotion displays over the evening hours (Campos et al., 2013). For the current study, we focus on the social support interactions that naturally arose for the couples, permitting study of *how* support is initiated, whether through *solicitations* (e.g., requests) for support by the recipient, or unprompted *offers* of support by the provider—a contribution of the current research design that is not possible with laboratory observations. And because these behaviors and interactions are observed inside the home where the demands of running a household and taking care of children are ever-present, these data are especially well-suited for capturing instrumental support occurrences in addition to the emotional support exchanges that are more easily elicited and more commonly studied in the laboratory.

To our knowledge, the only published quantitative study of couple interactions observed in naturalistic contexts is Wang and Repetti's (2014) analysis of the same video archive showing how the support behavior of individuals nested within couples was predicted by individual psychological variables. Notably, the results sometimes countered findings from self-report and lab observation studies. For example, whereas prior research had suggested that wives are more responsive and supportive to husbands' daily job stressors than husbands are to wives' job stressors (e.g., Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Neff & Karney, 2005), Wang and Repetti (2014) observed the opposite pattern—wives' job stress levels were linked with more unprompted provisions of support by husbands, but the association between husbands' job stress and wives' support provisions was not significant. In this way, naturalistic observation can shed new light on unstructured support processes as they unfold, unprompted and unfiltered, inside the home.

Whereas the Wang and Repetti (2014) analysis examined how psychological variables predicted the supportive behavior of individuals nested within couples, the current article extends the previous investigation by examining systematic gender differences in those support behaviors. The primary research goal of this study is to test the support gap hypothesis—namely, the proposition that husbands receive more support from their wives than wives do from their husbands (e.g., Belle, 1982; Cutrona, 1996). We do so by testing not only sex differences in the proportion of *support received* by each member of the couple, but also in how the support is initiated via *solicitations* by the recipient or *offers* by the provider given our interest in how support naturally arises. This article addresses two support gap research questions (RQ):

*RQ1:* Is there evidence for a support gap in which husbands receive more support from their wives than wives do from their husbands?

*RQ2:* Are there sex differences in the manner by which support is initiated (solicitations vs. offers)?

Additionally, we also test the related support gap question of whether there are sex differences in the *type* of support (instrumental or emotional) that is exchanged. The gender and coping literature (Cutrona, 1996; Matud, 2004; Taylor et al., 2000) would

suggest that husbands provide and solicit more instrumental support, and wives provide and solicit more emotional support.

*RQ3:* Are there sex differences in the type of support (instrumental vs. emotional) provided and solicited by husbands and wives?

A second goal of this study is to examine patterns in the behaviors that the spouses use to initiate support exchanges, by examining correlations between initiation behaviors displayed by the same individual and by the two members of the couple. Correlation patterns could suggest individual differences in the propensity to initiate support (e.g., a positive correlation between the rates at which an individual solicits and offers supports) as well as within-couple coordination of support behavior (e.g., a positive correlation between the rates of husbands' solicitations and wives' offers).

*RQ4:* Are rates of support solicitations and offers correlated within individuals and across spouses?

## Method

### Participants

Thirty-two families living in the greater Los Angeles area were recruited for an interdisciplinary study of everyday life in dual-earner middle-class families conducted by the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) and funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Eligibility criteria included families that: (a) were headed by two cohabiting adults, both of whom worked full-time (>30 hr per week), (b) included two to three children, one of whom was school-age (7 to 12 years old) at the time of the study, and (c) held a mortgage on their homes. The inclusion of families that had a school-age child rendered a sample of families at similar stages of the family life cycle, whereas holding a mortgage served as a marker of middle-class socioeconomic status. Both of these criteria served as anchors for standardization across our families for this larger study on dual-earner middle-class couples with school-age children. Families were recruited through advertisements in local newspapers and through schools, and participated during the years 2002–2005. Given the extensive and time-consuming nature of the many data collection procedures, families received an honorarium of \$1,000 for participation in the study.

Because of our focus on sex differences in supportive processes, this analysis focuses on the 30 families (60 adults) headed by heterosexual couples out of the 32 families from the larger CELf study. Video-recordings from the two same-sex couples were used to develop and pilot codes. The 30 couples had been married a range of 3–18 years (median = 13 years), and had on average 2.3 children. Husbands and wives both had a median age of 41 years (husbands' range 32–58 years; wives' range 28–50 years). Most (65%) had completed college, and the median family income was \$100,000 (range \$51,000 to \$196,000) in 2002–2005 U.S. dollars. The participants came from diverse ethnic groups, including non-Hispanic White (65%), Asian (16%), Hispanic (10%), and Black (9%) backgrounds. Procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Los Angeles, and couples provided written consent before study participation.

## Procedure

The CELF study aimed to broadly capture “a week in the life” of dual-earner middle-class families. Multiple methods were used in the larger study, including naturalistic observation (ethnographic video-recordings), self-reports, semistructured interviews, and salivary cortisol sampling (see Ochs, Graesch, Mittman, Bradbury, & Repetti, 2006; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2013). The current article focuses on one component of the data: ethnographic video-recordings of everyday family life and behavior. Before the week of observation, participants became familiar with study researchers and were acclimated to the filming process by completing other video-recorded activities, such as participating in a series of semistructured interviews and providing narrated home tours. Participants reported quickly becoming adjusted to being filmed, and described their behavior during the week of observation as being natural and unfiltered. This is consistent with a prior review of naturalistic observational studies that has found little evidence for behavioral reactivity in the presence of recording equipment or live observers (Repetti, Reynolds, & Sears, 2015). The ecological validity of naturalistic observational data is a unique advantage of the methodology, especially when compared with the self-presentation and recall biases that plague self-reports (Repetti et al., 2013) and the unnatural and prescribed nature of tasks and interactions in the laboratory (Gardner, 2000).

The week of naturalistic observation consisted of filming on two weekdays and two weekend days. Trained researchers intensively videotaped the couples using two professional quality handheld cameras, with one camera targeting the husband and one camera targeting the wife. Family members wore wireless microphones to capture dialogue with greater clarity. On the two weekdays, recording began once the first spouse awoke and opened the front door to waiting researchers, and then captured all morning activities until family members left the house for school and work, resumed once children and parents were reunited later that day, and ended once children went to bed. On weekends, families were filmed on Saturday and Sunday mornings as well as Sunday evenings until children went to bed.

**Organization of recordings.** The over 1,200 hr of ethnographic video-recordings were organized through a process of “culling” and “slicing.” First, a specially adapted digital software was used to cull the continuous streams of video footage for instances in which couples appeared together on-screen for more than 10 s. The culling process reduced the over 1,200 hr of video to approximately 174 hr across all 30 couples ( $M = 5.82$  hr,  $SD = 2.68$  hr), which represents approximately 87 hr of unique (true) couple-time video because the two cameras captured common footage (e.g., same interaction captured by both the wife’s and husband’s cameras). Because of the common footage, we used one camera’s footage for the first weekday and first weekend day, and the other camera’s footage for the second weekday and second weekend day. After this culling process, we then systematically sliced the couple-time video into standard units (i.e., video clips) of 10 to 30 s long for coding. Video were sliced into consecutive 30-s clips, and any remaining video shorter than 10 s was discarded. In total, 10,030 couple clips resulted from the culling and slicing process, with a mean of 335 couple clips per couple ( $SD = 132$ ; range 80–480).<sup>1</sup>

**Coding social support interactions.** We developed an observational coding system to assess naturally occurring couple support interactions (Wang & Repetti, 2012). The coding—reported in a prior analysis of these data (Wang & Repetti, 2014)—focused on four primary variables from the support interactions. As described in greater detail below, in a first step, we coded whether a supportive interaction took place (Support Occurrence). Then, each of the identified supportive interactions was assessed by three subsequent codes: one variable categorizing the type of support exchanged (Support Type), another assessing which spouse was the provider or recipient of support (Support Roles), and the last code relating to how the support was initiated (Support Initiation). Where multiple support clips comprised longer supportive interactions, we focused only on the first clip that marked the beginning of the supportive interaction given our interest in how support spontaneously arises in couples.

**Support occurrence.** We defined potentially supportive interactions as any opportunity to provide instrumental support or emotional support. To be coded as support, the help needed to be provided for meaningful or complex activities requiring some imposition or burden on the part of the provider. Simple actions (i.e., passing the peas at dinner) and simple questions (i.e., “Where are my glasses?”) were not coded as support.

**Support type.** Relatedly, each support occurrence was coded for the type of support being provided. *Instrumental/informational* support entailed help with practical problems and tasks, such as assistance with chores or the provision of information to help handle a task-oriented problem (e.g., figuring out the fastest driving route to the doctor’s office). *Emotional support* included provisions of comfort, encouragement, advice, or guidance of an emotional nature, for example, listening empathetically to a spouse’s frustrations about work.

**Support roles.** Each potentially supportive interaction was then coded for the role played by each member of the couple, specifically, whether the husband or wife was in the role of *Provider* (i.e., the “helper”) or the role of *Recipient* (i.e., the “helpee”).

**Support initiation.** The manner by which each support interaction was initiated (*Solicited* or *Offered*) was also assessed. *Solicited* or *invited* support was broadly defined as any verbal or nonverbal behavior that may draw for support provision from the partner, including explicit requests for help or assistance (e.g., “Can you wash the dishes?” “Work was so stressful today, I just need to vent.”), as well as when a spouse communicates information that is a reasonably clear invitation or prompt for support (e.g., “I’m too tired to wash the dishes.” “Boy, work was crazy today.”). We defined *offered* support by a partner as any verbal or nonverbal behavior that may indicate the offer of support in the absence of any clear solicitation or invitation for support (e.g., “Why don’t I do the dishes tonight?”, “You look stressed. How was work?”).

<sup>1</sup> We capped the total number of clips per couple at 480 clips. For the eight couples whose footage exceeded that number, clips were eliminated by reducing clips on days with more footage and maintaining the number of clips on days with less footage, while also prioritizing the continuity of events. Because analyses use couple-level proportions, the elimination or addition of extra hours of footage does not meaningfully change the analysis.

Twelve coders first attended instructional meetings on coding concepts and procedures with the lead author, followed by 6 training rounds on 367 clips from the two pilot families headed by male same-sex couples. Each round involved coding clips, calculating interrater reliability, and meeting with the lead author for feedback before continuing with the next training round. All potentially supportive interactions that were identified by coders in this training and reliability phase were discussed in large-group team meetings, and 31 clips were ultimately agreed upon by the team as containing a support occurrence. Eight of the 12 coders successfully completed the training period with acceptable reliability levels, and proceeded to the official coding effort for the video from the families headed by the 30 heterosexual couples. A pair of coders was assigned to each couple's recordings, and pairings were rotated among team members. Each video clip for each family was first coded independently by the two coders who then met with each other to reconcile any discrepant codes for each and every clip. When coders were unable to confidently reconcile their codes, these coding issues were then discussed by the entire team at the weekly meeting who would then make a decision about the code. Thus, the careful coding protocol maximized the accuracy and quality of the coding through multiple layers (individual, partner/pair, or team) of scrutiny. Only final reconciled codes were used in analyses. However, interrater reliability estimates—using Cohen's  $\kappa$  and percent agreement (calculated as the number of agreements over the total number of clips)—were computed on the coders' independent codes before the pair reconciliation process, and demonstrate good to excellent levels of reliability (Fleiss, 1981) across all four codes: Support Occurrence ( $\kappa = .74$ , percent agreement = .98), Support Type ( $\kappa = .94$ , percent agreement = .98), Support Initiation ( $\kappa = .87$ , percent agreement = .94), and Support Roles ( $\kappa = .95$ , percent agreement = .98).

### Support Proportion Variables

For each support code (type, role, or initiation) given that support was observed, two varieties of proportion variables were computed for each couple. One assessed the probability that, when a supportive interaction occurred, a particular spouse (husband or wife) engaged in that type of behavior (i.e., the couple's total

number of support interactions served as the denominator). The other group of variables assessed the rate at which a support behavior was coded given that the couple was observed together (i.e., the couple's total number of clips served as the denominator). Descriptive information for all proportion variables are reported in Table 1.

**Support gap variables.** To test the Support Gap Hypothesis (RQ1 and RQ2), six husband and wife proportion variables were computed based on the total number of supportive interactions observed for that couple: *Husband Received Support*, *Wife Received Support*, *Husband Solicited Support*, *Wife Solicited Support*, *Husband Offered Support*, and *Wife Offered Support*. The proportion scores represent the rate at which support was received (or solicited or offered) by each spouse given that couples were observed engaging in a supportive interaction. Note that the proportion of a spouse's Received Support is a linear combination of that spouse's own Solicited Support and the partner's Offered Support.

To address RQ3, we computed six additional proportion variables to examine husband and wife proportions of received, solicited, and offered support for *Instrumental Support* in particular (relative to Emotional Support; recall that all support interactions were coded as either instrumental or emotional in nature). First, *Husband and Wife Received Instrumental Support* proportions were computed based on the total number of supportive interactions observed for that couple. These two proportion variables address how much instrumental (and inversely, emotional support) was received by husbands and wives out of all support exchanged in that couple. In addition, *Husband and Wife Solicited Instrumental Support* proportions were computed based on the number of support interactions solicited by husbands (for husband proportions) and by wives (for wife proportions). Similarly, *Husband and Wife Offered Instrumental Support* proportions were computed based on the number of support interactions that were offered by husbands (for husband proportions) and by wives (for wife proportions). These last four proportion variables further reveal tendencies by a member of the couple to favor instrumental compared to emotional support when soliciting support from a partner and when offering support to a partner.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics for Husband and Wife Support Proportion Variables

Support proportion variables	Husband			Wife			Paired samples <i>t</i> -test ( <i>df</i> = 29)
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Range	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Range	
Received Support (when couples exchanged support) <sup>a</sup>	.41	.23	.06–.80	.59	.23	.20–.94	–2.05*
Solicited Support (when couples exchanged support) <sup>a</sup>	.22	.16	.00–.60	.42	.24	.00–.81	–3.17**
Offered (when couples exchanged support) <sup>a</sup>	.16	.12	.00–.43	.20	.18	.00–.80	–.93
Received Instrumental (when couples exchanged support) <sup>a</sup>	.31	.18	.06–.67	.52	.21	.20–.86	–3.30**
Solicited Instrumental (when couples exchanged support) <sup>a</sup>	.14	.13	.00–.50	.36	.22	.00–.78	–3.94***
Offered Instrumental (when couples exchanged support) <sup>a</sup>	.15	.12	.00–.43	.16	.13	.00–.50	–.49
Solicited Support (when couples were together) <sup>b</sup>	.01	.01	.00–.04	.02	.02	.00–.05	–2.88**
Offered Support (when couples were together) <sup>b</sup>	.01	.01	.00–.04	.01	.01	.00–.03	–.39

<sup>a</sup> Denominator is the number of supportive interactions for each couple. These proportions reflect the rate of support behavior for each couple given that the couple was exchanging support. <sup>b</sup> Denominator is the number of couple clips for each couple. These proportions reflect the rate of support behavior for each couple given that the couple was together.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Couple support initiation patterns.** To examine patterns in how methods of support initiation are linked within individuals and across spouses (RQ4), another four husband and wife proportion variables were computed based on the total number of *couple clips* for that couple. These proportion scores represent the rate at which support was solicited or offered by each spouse given that couples were observed together on-screen and, therefore, had the opportunity to engage in a supportive interaction. These proportion variables are: *Husband Solicited Support When Together*, *Wife Solicited Support When Together*, *Husband Offered Support When Together*, and *Wife Offered Support When Together*.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

In total, 432 clips were coded as containing Support Occurrences out of the 10,030 overall couple clips that were culled. Thus, support only occurred about 4.3% (432/10,030) of the time that couples were captured on-screen. Close study of these 432 support clips revealed that there were 356 *unique support interactions* after accounting for instances when multiple support clips contributed toward a single overarching support interaction. When considering the 356 unique support interactions, the majority of support was received by wives (66%) compared with husbands (34%), and was of an instrumental (82%) versus emotional nature (18%). Furthermore, support interactions were more likely to be initiated via solicitations for support (68%) relative to unprompted offers of support (32%).<sup>2</sup>

### Tests of the Support Gap Hypothesis

The Support Gap Hypothesis posits that husbands receive more support from their wives than wives do from their husbands. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and paired samples *t* tests comparing husbands and wives on all support proportion scores. First, we examine Received Support (RQ1), as well as support initiated through Solicitations and Offers (RQ2), given that a support interaction occurred (see Figure 1). Results counter the Support Gap Hypothesis; wives were the support recipients at a significantly higher rate than husbands. Findings also show that wives solicited support at significantly higher rates than husbands solicited from wives, but there were no differences in the rates at which husbands and wives offered support. Thus, in the supportive interactions that we observed, wives received significantly more support than husbands did, and this difference seems to be driven by wives' active *solicitations* of support, rather than by husbands' offers of support.

Next, we tested whether husbands and wives differed in the *type of support* that they engaged in with their partners (RQ3). Prior research on gender and coping styles suggests that husbands provide and use more instrumental support, and wives provide and use more emotional support. Paired samples *t* tests (see Table 1) comparing the variables that represented husband and wife proportions of received, solicited, and offered *Instrumental Support* tested sex differences in the rates of Instrumental Support (vs. Emotional Support; see Figure 2). Wives received a greater proportion of instrumental versus emotional support compared with husbands. Furthermore, wives were more likely to solicit instrumental versus emotional support than were husbands; there were no sex differences with respect to offers of instrumental support.<sup>3</sup> These findings indicate that wives received

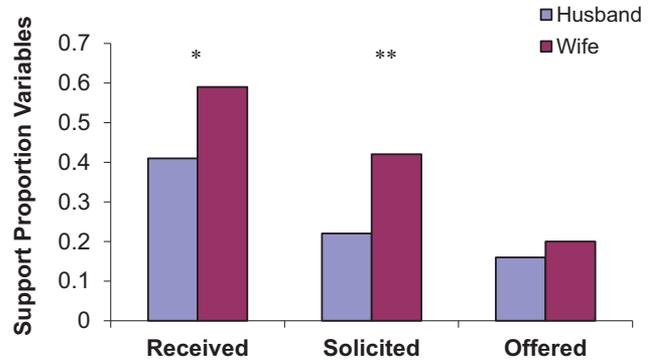


Figure 1. Sex differences in support proportion variables given that a supportive interaction occurred. Note: Denominator is the number of support interactions for each couple. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . See the online article for the color version of this figure.

more instrumental support (vs. emotional support) compared with their husbands, and husbands received more emotional support (vs. instrumental support) compared with their wives. The pattern seems to be driven by wives' propensity to solicit instrumental support, and by husbands' propensity to solicit emotional support.

We also conducted a chi square test of independence to examine patterns in the co-occurrence of the Solicitor Role variable (whether the husband or wife was the support solicitor) and Support Type variable (whether the support was instrumental or emotional) at the level of the support interaction. Because tested patterns comprised  $2 \times 2$  contingency tables (yielding  $df = 1$ ), the Yates Chi Square that is corrected for continuity was used instead of a Pearson Chi Square. Percentage deviation statistics<sup>4</sup> (corrected for continuity) were used to illustrate the patterns among the

<sup>2</sup> Initial analyses indicated that demographic (couple ethnicity, husband education, or wife education), individual well-being (depressive symptoms), and relationship (marital satisfaction, division of housework) variables were not related to the husband and wife support proportion variables. Therefore, these variables were not considered further.

<sup>3</sup> We also examined instrumental support proportions based on denominators adjusted for the specific number of received, solicited, and offered support interactions for each husband and wife (e.g., husband solicited instrumental support was computed using the total number of husband solicited support interactions as the denominator). Results corroborate the earlier findings that used the total number of supportive interactions for each couple as the denominator for the proportion variables. When they received support, wives were more likely to be the recipients of instrumental support versus emotional support ( $M = .90$ ,  $SD = .18$ ) compared with their husbands ( $M = .79$ ,  $SD = .24$ ;  $t(29) = -2.14$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, a marginally significant difference shows that when wives solicited support, they were more likely to solicit instrumental support from their husbands ( $M = .87$ ,  $SD = .20$ ) compared with the likelihood that husbands solicit instrumental support from their wives ( $M = .72$ ,  $SD = .31$ ;  $t(29) = -1.96$ ,  $p < .10$ ). On the other hand, a marginally significant finding shows that husbands offered more instrumental support ( $M = .96$ ,  $SD = .14$ ) to their wives than wives offered to their husbands ( $M = .90$ ,  $SD = .21$ ;  $t(29) = 1.81$ ,  $p < .10$ ).

<sup>4</sup> We used the online program offered by VassarStats (<http://faculty.vassar.edu/lowry/newcs.html>) in computing the Yates Chi Square and percentage deviation statistics. The formula for percentage deviation corrected for continuity was:  $[(\text{observed} - \text{expected}) - 0.5/\text{expected}] \times 100$ . A positive sign was given to values when observed  $>$  expected, and a negative sign was given to values when expected  $<$  observed.

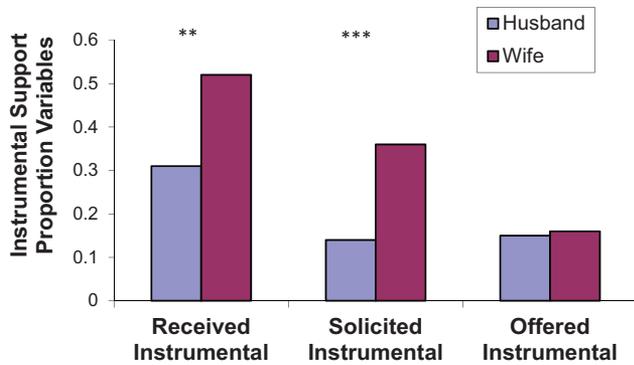


Figure 2. Sex differences in instrumental support proportion variables given that a supportive interaction occurred. Note: Denominator is the number of support interactions for each couple. \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . See the online article for the color version of this figure.

frequencies of the variables, and represents the degree to which an observed  $\chi^2$  cell frequency differed from the value that would be expected on the basis of the null hypothesis. Thus, a percentage deviation of +20% for a cell indicates that the observed frequency was 20% greater than expected by chance, while a percentage deviation of -20% indicates that the observed frequency was 20% less than expected by chance. Results corroborated the between-subjects findings using paired samples  $t$  tests,  $\chi^2(1, N = 240) = 4.37, p < .05$ . Husband solicitations of emotional support were more frequent (+41.2%) and their solicitations of instrumental support were less frequent (-11.4%) than would be expected by chance. Conversely, wife solicitations of instrumental support were more frequent (+4.4%) and their solicitations of emotional support were less frequent (-16.0%) than would be expected by chance.

### Patterns of Offers and Solicitations of Support

Bivariate correlations examined how the four variables that assess husbands' and wives' methods of support initiation were associated with each other (RQ4). We note the substantial individual variability in our sample, evidenced by the large ranges and  $SDs$  of the support proportion variables. Two of the correlations in Table 2 assess linkages between an individual's rates of offers and solicitations of marital support. Results indicated a strong positive association among husbands ( $r(27) = .50, p < .01$ ), but not among wives ( $r(27) = .11, NS$ ). Using the Fisher  $r$ -to- $z$  transformation, the magnitude of this relationship between rates of offers and solicitations of marital support is marginally stronger for husbands than for wives ( $z = 1.52, p = .064$ ). Husbands who offered support at higher rates also tended to solicit support at higher rates, a pattern not shown for wives.

These variables also allowed us to examine how husbands' and wives' rates of offers and solicitations of support were linked with each other. Two correlations in Table 2 address the same behavior in the partners. Rates of husband-offers and wife-offers of support were significantly associated ( $r(27) = .38, p < .05$ ), indicating that more offers of support by one spouse were linked with more offers of support by the other. However, the association between rates of husband-solicitations and wife-solicitations of support was non-

significant ( $r(27) = -.19, NS$ ). The two correlations—husband/wife offers compared with husband/wife solicitations—significantly differed from each other ( $z = 2.05, p < .05$ ). The final two correlations in Table 2 address different behaviors, the association between rates of one spouse's support solicitations and the other spouse's support offers. A greater proportion of husband-solicitations was positively linked with a greater proportion of wife-offers ( $r(27) = .41, p < .05$ ). This association was not significant for wife-solicitations and husband-offers of support ( $r(27) = .25, NS$ ). However, the difference between the two correlations was not statistically significant ( $z = .62, NS$ ).

### Discussion

The current study is the first to use naturalistic observations of explicit face-to-face couple support interactions in everyday settings to test the support gap hypothesis that husbands receive more support from their wives than wives do from their husbands. The unique CELF video archive affords a number of methodological and conceptual advantages to the study of supportive interactions based on self-report methods and observations made in the laboratory. First, the present research is well-suited to capture *instrumental support occurrences* in addition to the emotional support exchanges that are more typically examined in researcher-prompted conversations. Second, the nature of the recordings allowed us to move beyond the study of support provision and receipt to observe the way that *support is spontaneously initiated* through solicitations by the recipient or unprompted offers by the provider. Third, these data illuminate the kinds of supportive interactions that organically take place in the midst of noisy, messy, everyday life. Often too mundane, routinized, or subconscious to be captured via self-report, and too idiosyncratic to real-world settings and schedules to be replicated in structured lab situations, these naturalistic recordings provide a rare glimpse into the daily supportive processes that allow dual-earner couples with children to manage their busy home lives. The result is a rich descriptive analysis that uncovered patterns in husband and wife support initiations, and a direct test of the support gap hypothesis using explicit face-to-face support interactions.

### Everyday Support: Rare But Largely Instrumental

Social support appeared to be just a small component of the everyday couple interactions that were recorded. The small fraction of the time that couples spent together in which support was observed and coded (4.3%) suggests that while support is an

Table 2  
Correlations Among Support Proportion Variables Across Spouses Given That Couples Were Together

Support Proportion Variables (when couples were together)	Husband Solicited	Husband Offered	Wife Solicited	Wife Offered
Husband Solicited				
Husband Offered	.50**			
Wife Solicited	-.19	.25		
Wife Offered	.41*	.38*	.11	

Note. Denominator is the number of couple clips for each couple. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

everyday occurrence, it is not a primary part of couples' daily experiences. Furthermore, the vast majority of supportive interactions we observed was characterized as instrumental (82%) versus emotional (18%) in nature, indicating that support tended to be practical and oriented toward completing the day-to-day tasks that keep a household running. The emphasis on instrumental support is notable given that emotional support receives much more attention in the research literature. However, we note that the relatively low frequency of emotional support occurrence does not necessarily imply that emotional support transactions have a weaker impact on the marital relationship and home life. In fact, those transactions, when they do occur, may have a disproportionate effect on marital and individual well-being.

The limited amount of time spent in overt (and largely instrumental) supportive interaction must be understood in the greater context of home life for these working parents with school-age children. Scholars have characterized the experience of returning home from work to domestic demands as the "six o'clock crash" (Larson, Richards, & Perry-Jenkins, 1994), and described household duties and childcare as "the second shift" (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Hochschild, 1989). A prior analysis of the CELF scan sampling data—in which a researcher systematically documented the locations of all family members at 10 min intervals—found that couples were observed together and with their children in about 35% of the scan sampling rounds, but were observed together *without* children present in less than 10% of the scan sampling rounds (Campos, Graesch, Repetti, Bradbury, & Ochs, 2009). Thus, during the times that they were observed, spouses were very seldom alone with their partners and were more likely to be busy with domestic tasks. This colors the background in which opportunities for supportive interactions took place; unlike laboratory observation paradigms, the participants were not sharing private moments focused on "couple issues" or moments characterized by undivided attention. Rather, the supportive interactions we observed were woven into the fabric of busy family life and household demands.

### A Different Type of Gap?

The main goal of the present research was to use explicit face-to-face interactions in everyday family life to test the support gap hypothesis (e.g., Belle, 1982; Cutrona, 1996) based on self-reports of men receiving more support (and more helpful support) from their wives than wives report receiving from their husbands. Laboratory observations have failed to replicate such a support gap, and in fact, show no sex differences in the amount of support provided and received within couples (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2005; Verhofstadt et al., 2007). Our naturalistic data are the first to suggest that, in fact, husbands may provide *more* support to their wives than wives provide to their husbands; wives were the recipients in two-thirds of the support interactions that were observed. In addition, the difference appeared to be driven specifically by wives' own support-seeking behavior, as opposed to husbands offering or volunteering support more frequently to their wives. This finding highlights the importance of supplementing the study of rates of received and provided support with an examination of *how* support is initiated—something that cannot be accomplished through researcher-prompted support interactions in the lab.

It is interesting to consider the wife and mother from one of the CELF families, who was quoted at the start of this article, in light of our findings. Her comments corroborate the traditional support gap hypothesis and reflect her perception that she does a lot while her husband does little. However, our coding of the support exchanged in that couple indicates that this wife actually received the greatest proportion of support (.94) out of all 60 men and women in our sample and, while the proportion of her own solicitations of support was on the higher end (.59), her spouse offered the second highest proportion of support (.35) of all husbands. This is just one example, but the case highlights differences in the phenomena tapped by self-report and naturalistic observation methodologies.

We also found nuance in the types of support that were preferentially exchanged by husbands and wives. The gender role (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997; Tannen, 1990) and stress and coping literatures (e.g., Cutrona, 1996; Matud, 2004; Taylor et al., 2000) broadly propose that women prefer emotional support and men prefer instrumental support. In contrast, we found that wives received a greater proportion of instrumental support from husbands (than husbands did from wives), and husbands received a greater proportion of emotional support from wives (than wives did from husbands). Chi-square analyses indicated that wives solicited instrumental support, and husbands solicited emotional support, more frequently than would be expected by chance alone.

There are a few potential explanations for these surprising findings. Perhaps wives solicited more instrumental support because they expected their husbands to be better providers of instrumental support in particular, and were modifying their help-seeking to align with their husbands' strengths. Another potential influence is that the wives may have had less need of emotional support from their husbands because of the availability of alternative sources (e.g., friends, relatives). Indeed, research on couples and their support networks has suggested that women may draw on wider and more varied support networks, whereas men turn primarily to their wives for support (e.g., Phillipson, 1997). For example, a study on male air traffic controllers found that the wives' daily emotional support facilitated social withdrawal (or unwinding) for the air traffic controllers following stressful days at work (Repetti, 1989).

Last, wives may have solicited more instrumental support simply because of being taxed with an objectively greater share of the domestic workload and, thus, being in a position of enlisting assistance. A prior analysis of the CELF couples showed that wives spent a significantly higher percentage of their time in the home on housework (31%) and childcare (10%) compared with their husbands (20% and 6%; Saxbe, Repetti, & Graesch, 2011). Thus, many of the wives may have been in the role of coordinating and delegating household tasks, resulting in instructions or directions to the spouse that were subsequently coded as solicitations for instrumental support. A microscopic approach to the CELF recordings allowed us to assess overt support behavior, but is not well-suited for discerning the intention or larger meaning behind a behavior, such as the extent to which a request for assistance with a task communicates a need for help versus an assignment of a chore to a partner who is perceived as not pulling his weight. The wife and mother quoted at the start of this article perceives herself as getting the short end of the stick with respect to the day-to-day management of the household, and that perception may drive many of her requests for assistance. Our observational analysis captured

her support solicitations but not their motivations or larger psychological context.

In summary, our data counter the traditional support gap hypothesis, and put forth evidence for a different support gap—one in which wives receive more support from their husbands (than husbands receive from their wives). This gap is driven by the wives' own active solicitations for support, specifically instrumental support that is likely influenced by the backdrop of family life in which wives typically shoulder a larger domestic workload. When it came to husbands' support behavior patterns, however, we found that they solicited emotional support from their wives more than would be expected by chance alone, perhaps reflecting a more prominent role played by wives as support providers in husbands' social networks.

### Couple Support Initiation Patterns

A unique contribution of the present research is the analysis of how support was *initiated* in couples—through solicitations by recipients or offers by providers. By disentangling the methods of initiation that launch supportive exchanges, we were able to examine how the rates of those behaviors were linked within individuals as well as across spouses. Rates of soliciting and offering support were strongly correlated for husbands, suggesting that husbands tend to be either high or low support engagers, consistently using both methods to similar degrees with their spouses. However, the correlation between the two wife proportion scores was not significant.

Across spouses, our data showed that offers of support by husbands are positively associated with offers of support by wives. Thus, our couples appear to mirror one another in volunteering support to similar degrees—more offers of support by one spouse linked with more offers of support by the partner. However, we did not find a linkage between husbands' and wives' support solicitations, and in fact, the nonsignificant correlation was in a negative direction. Additionally, a strong correlation between solicitations by husbands and offers from wives (but a nonsignificant association between wife-solicitations and husband-offers) may shed further light on a coordination process whereby wives either respond to needier husbands with more offers to help, or husbands capitalize on helpful wives by increasing their requests for assistance. These patterns suggest a nuanced relationship between support solicitations and support offers within couples that would be difficult to capture in controlled research settings.

### Limitations

The CELF sample of heterosexual, dual-earner, middle-class couples living in Los Angeles may hamper the generalizability of our findings. The kinds of families who are willing to participate in a naturalistic observation study may also represent a biased or self-selected group. Another limitation is that filming ended when the children went to bed; thus, our cameras missed couple interactions—supportive, conflictive, or otherwise—that took place after the children had retired for the night and the researchers were gone. Emotional support interactions may have been more frequent, and addressed different issues, during private one-on-one conversations later in the evening, away from children and cameras.

Our coding scheme identified explicit support interactions. However, instances of “invisible support” (e.g., Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000) and “smooth coordination” (i.e., unspoken and routinized cooperation between spouses; Klein et al., 2007) were likely undetected by spouses and observers alike. The larger social and psychological context for a supportive behavior—for example, whether it was reciprocated or not, or the motivation driving the behavior—is also missed by focusing on explicit support assessed in small slices of observed behavior. Clearly, supportive actions that did not take place on-screen or in the context of a face-to-face interaction were also missed by our observational methodology. Laboratory observations, questionnaires, intensive repeated measures, and direct observation in natural settings all provide valuable and unique vantage points on the construct of social support, each with different strengths and weaknesses that complement those of the other methods. All are needed for a robust understanding of couple support processes.

The ethnographic video-recordings provided a rich glimpse into supportive interactions as they unfold *in situ* in couples' everyday lives, allowing a unique vantage point unattainable in the laboratory. However, the resource-intensive nature of this methodology also means a small sample (30 heterosexual couples) by most laboratory and self-report study standards, and thus, a limited statistical power to detect small effects. Indeed, post hoc power analyses conducted using G\*Power 3.1 software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) revealed that while we were sufficiently powered to detect moderate to large effect sizes ( $d > .50$ ) for group differences, we were underpowered in our ability to detect differences of small effect sizes. Furthermore, power analyses show that correlations must approach  $r = .50$  to obtain statistical power at the .80 level. It is possible that what were statistically nonsignificant findings may have approached significance had the sample been larger.

### Clinical Implications and Future Directions

These limitations notwithstanding, the research presented here reveals new insights into supportive interactions that take place outside of researcher-directed situations, highlighting the differences between the types of supportive behaviors that are prompted and performed in the lab versus the ones that unfold naturalistically in the midst of the busy-ness of everyday life. These findings have particular relevance for therapists who work with couples and families. When distressed individuals report experiencing a lack of support in their relationship—a frequently cited reason for relationship break-up (Baxter, 1986)—therapists can help probe and explore the kinds of support perceived to be lacking, while also assisting individuals to recognize forms of support that they do receive but may not automatically encode as being supportive. For example, while there seems to be more emphasis on emotional support process both in popular culture and in research, our findings underscore the dominant role of instrumental support in the busy lives of dual-earner families. Therapy may address issues related to division of household labor and the transaction of instrumental support, in particular bearing in mind the gender differences we observed and the potential driving forces behind these differences. Therapists would also be well-advised to help couples better understand their interactional patterns by which

support tends to be initiated, and to evaluate whether these are the most effective for that particular couple.

More important, our data were not consistent with a previously proposed support gap that favors men as support recipients and women as support providers. Instead, this study suggests that women are the primary recipients of instrumental support from their husbands in the home. Clearly, replication is needed. Further examination and contextualization will help us understand how the two support gap patterns, based on different methodologies, may fit with each other. As video technology continues to advance and miniature cameras become increasingly accessible, nimble, and nonintrusive in their recording capabilities, the time is ripe to capitalize on and unleash the power of naturalistic observation in capturing family and relationship processes with greater resolution (Repetti et al., 2015). Additional investigations using ecologically valid naturalistic observations are highly recommended to move the fields of family and relationship science forward.

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