

## Provision and Receipt of Emotional Spousal Support: The Impact of Visibility on Well-Being

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The present study systematically examined the impact of visibility of emotional support provision and receipt in the daily lives of married couples. Hierarchical linear modeling analyses indicated that *reported* support provision was related to less anxiety and depression and more positive mood, whereas *unacknowledged* support provision was related to more anxiety and depression. Moreover, reported support *receipt* was beneficial for an individual's well-being, such that it was related to more positive mood and less anxiety and depression. On the other hand, *invisible* support receipt was only found to be related to less anxiety. No gender differences were found for any of the analyses. These results suggest the importance of examining support provision and receipt in marital relationships.

*Keywords:* social support, marriage, gender, well-being

Research on marital relationships consistently finds that husbands and wives differ not only in their perceptions of the relationship, but they also receive differential levels of benefits from marriage. The issue of spousal support has been a primary focus in this field of research because of its importance in both the marital relationship and marital satisfaction (e.g., Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997; Sullivan et al., 2010). Yet, a clear understanding of the dyadic interplay of spousal support between partners is limited. Bolger and colleagues (2000) introduced the concept of *invisible* support as a way to better understand how provision and receipt perceptions work together to impact an individual. However, Bolger's research focuses exclusively on *receipt* of invisible support in the context of an acute stressor. The present study seeks to systematically examine the visibility of emotional spousal support provision and receipt in the context of the daily lives of newly married couples.

Emotional support is specifically examined in the current study because it is an important aspect of relationship satisfaction in the lives of couples (e.g., Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997). Moreover, we examined newly married couples because we felt that the early years of marriage may be a time when support visibility is more important as couples are establishing their communication and support styles. Additionally, support visibility is a new area of research in spousal support, and examining newly married couples allows us to expand on the prior literature and deepen our understanding of the support relationship in couples. Thus, this nuanced picture of emotional support processes can lead to a better understanding of how support transactions within newly married couples function to impact mental well-being.

Support from one's spouse—especially emotional support—is one of the most important predictors of an individual's well-being (e.g., Thoits, 1995). Emotional spousal support refers to expressions of interest, caring and understanding, and receiving empathy from one's spouse. Coyne and DeLongis (1986) found, among married individuals experiencing a stressful event, support from other sources does not completely compensate for lack of social support from one's spouse. Yet, numerous studies have also found that marriage is more beneficial for husbands than wives (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). One explanation for

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this gender gap may be that wives are providing more and receiving less emotional support than husbands (e.g., Vinokur & Vinokur-Kaplan, 1990). Wives have also been found to provide more support on days when their husbands were experiencing stress. Husbands, on the other hand, provided both support *and* negative behaviors on days when their wives were experiencing stress. Consequently, wives reported feeling less supported on stressful days than did their husbands (Neff & Karney, 2005). What remains unclear is how emotional spousal support plays out in the daily lives of married couples and whether or not the visibility of this support is important for the well-being of the partners.

One potential way to expand our understanding of spousal support and the gender gap in marriage is through examination of the visibility of support in these exchanges. Research on received support is typically assessed by asking individuals whether certain acts of support have occurred—in other words, visible or *reported* support receipt. By contrast, Bolger and colleagues argue that *invisible* support receipt may be a more positive type of support receipt. Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler (2000) define invisible support as occurring in two ways: (1) specific supportive expressions that “occur outside of the recipient’s awareness” and (2) behaviors or expressions that the recipient is aware of but does not register as support. Individuals reap the benefits of being provided with support without the negative consequences reported support receipt can have on an individual—that is, the supportive act helps the recipient in dealing with a situation without harming his or her self-esteem or feelings of self-efficacy (Bolger et al., 2000; Bolger & Amarel, 2007).

Research conducted on invisible support in couples has focused on a specific stressor occurring to only one partner. Bolger et al. (2000) investigated the impact of receiving reported versus invisible emotional spousal support in law students preparing to take the bar exam. *Invisible* emotional support from one’s spouse lessened depression but not anxiety, whereas *reported* emotional support from one’s spouse showed only a slight benefit over no support. Although Bolger and colleagues have shown that receiving invisible spousal support is beneficial for individuals experiencing an acute stressor, it is unclear whether invisible spousal

support is beneficial in nonstressful times. Recently, Vangelisti (2009) suggested that invisible support may not be as beneficial in everyday or positive situations as it is in negative or stressful situations. Specifically, Vangelisti argues that support in more positive situations can communicate interest in the other person, encouragement, validation, and love. Hence, invisible support in this context means the individual is unaware of these acts of love. Therefore, to expand on Bolger and colleague’s prior findings, the current study will examine the impact of the visibility of emotional spousal support receipt in the context of daily life, rather than in a controlled setting or while experiencing a specific stressor. Based on Vangelisti’s argument, we predict that *invisible support receipt* will have little or no relation with daily well-being. Moreover, given the daily context, we predict that *reported* emotional support receipt will be related to better well-being as it is less tied to feelings of competence and more to feeling loved and valued by one’s partner.

One additional issue with regard to support visibility is whether it is equally beneficial for the provider and receiver. As stated above, receiving support may have detrimental effects because needs are not always met when support is received and the support receipt may imply the recipient is not in control of the situation and must depend on others (Helgeson, 1993; Shrout, Herman, & Bolger, 2006). On the other hand, several studies have shown that *providing* social support is more beneficial than receiving social support (e.g., Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & Strout, 2003). The explanations for these findings include the potential to increase self-esteem and well-being, and buffer against distress (Väänänen et al., 2005), as well as allowing the individual to feel valued and needed by others (Knoll et al., 2007). Several gender differences were also found in the aforementioned studies. Väänänen et al. (2005) found evidence that women benefit more from support provision, whereas men benefit more from support receipt. Additionally, Knoll et al. (2007) found that women benefit most from providing emotional support—in this study support receipt was not related to outcomes for either men or women. However, these prior studies focus exclusively on *reported* support receipt and provision. Will the same pattern hold for *invisible* support receipt and *unacknowledged* support provision?

Bolger and colleagues argue that receiving invisible support should be related to better mental health outcomes. To our knowledge, the impact of providing unacknowledged emotional support on mental well-being has not been examined. When an individual provides support but is not given credit for it, he or she may feel upset or not validated and these feelings may increase negative well-being. In married couples, provision of support without acknowledgment may be interpreted as ungratefulness and could even lead to arguments about what one spouse has provided. Thus, we predict that *unacknowledged* emotional support provision will be related to worse well-being whereas *reported* emotional support provision will be related to better well-being.

Finally, based on prior literature, we predict that husbands will benefit most from *receiving* emotional support, whereas wives will benefit most from *providing* emotional support. Given the lack of prior research on support visibility and gender, we did not make specific predictions about gender differences with regard to invisible emotional support receipt and unacknowledged emotional support provision.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

To test the current hypotheses, a 7-day diary study was conducted to collect information about emotional support provision and receipt in married couples during the early years of marriage (i.e., less than 7 years). The sample was composed of 50 heterosexual couples ( $n = 100$  individuals) married for the first time. Couples were married on average for 4 years ( $SD = 2$  years), were primarily White (90%), had a mean household income of approximately \$58,000 ( $M = \$57,437$ ;  $SD = \$29,581$ ), and 44% had children. Age ranged from 19 to 46 years, with husbands slightly older ( $M = 31$ ;  $SD = 6$ ) than wives ( $M = 30$ ;  $SD = 6$ ). Participants were recruited from a Midwestern university through emails and flyers to faculty, staff, and students. Potential participants were told the study was examining the daily lives of newly married couples. Couples completing the study were paid \$25 and entered into a raffle for \$50. Couples initially came to the lab together to complete informed-consent forms and learn

how to use the online daily diary survey. Afterward, couples were separated to individually complete a baseline survey. Couples were asked to complete their daily questionnaires independently of their spouse each day for 7 days. Each member of the couple was given a user ID and password to log onto the survey from home or work which provided a time stamp of when the daily survey was completed. Reminder emails were sent out to couples periodically throughout the daily diary portion to remind them to complete the daily surveys. In case of technical difficulties or inability to access the online diary on a given day, participants were also provided with a hard copy of the daily diary surveys to complete and return if needed. In addition, the survey for a given day was only available after 6 p.m. so that the participant had a better chance of providing an accurate representation of the support provided and received for that day. Only seven individuals completed the entire diary on paper versions. In these cases, phone calls were made on Days 2, 4, 6, and 7 to remind participants to fill out the survey. Participants who filled out the survey online received a reminder phone call only if they had not filled out the survey on a particular day.

### Measures

**Well-being.** Daily well-being was assessed using an adapted version of the Profile of Mood States (POMS), consisting of 25 items (McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1971). Participants in the current study were asked to report each day to what extent they felt each of the given moods on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *very slightly or not at all* to 5 = *extremely*) each day. For the purposes of the current analysis, a mean score was calculated for three factors of the POMS: positive mood ( $\alpha = .91$ ), depression ( $\alpha = .90$ ), and anxiety ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Reported provision and receipt of support.** To examine reported provision and receipt of emotional spousal support, participants were asked how much emotional support they provided to and received from their spouse each day. *Provision* of support consisted of six items (e.g., "How much did you show your spouse you cared about them today?") rated on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a lot*). The items regarding *receipt* of emotional support paralleled the six provision items but were

asked in relation to how much support their spouse *gave* them that day (e.g., “how much did your spouse show you that they cared about you today?”). Mean scores were calculated for reported support provision ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and reported support receipt ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Unacknowledged support provision.** To calculate the amount of *unacknowledged* support provision, a difference score was created between an individual’s report of how much support they provided minus how much support their spouse reported receiving from them. For example, we calculated the difference between how much a wife reported providing emotional support to her husband on a given day (e.g., score of 4) minus how much the husband reported receiving emotional support from his wife on that day (e.g., score of 3.) Thus, the unacknowledged support provision score for the wife on that day would be a 1. Because we are interested in unacknowledged support provision (as opposed to overacknowledged support provision), we decided to collapse all instances where the recipient reported receiving more than the provider reported giving to zero—in other words, a score of zero represents all levels of reported support provision.

**Invisible support receipt.** The calculation of *invisible* support receipt parallels that of unacknowledged support provision, but this measure focuses on how much the individual reports receiving compared with what their spouse provided. In other words, a difference score was created between how much support a spouse reported providing minus how much support an individual reported receiving. For instance, we calculated the difference between how much a husband reported providing support to his wife on a given day (e.g., score of 5) minus how much his wife reported receiving support from the husband on that day (e.g., score of 3). Thus, invisible emotional support receipt score for the wife on that day would be 2. Again, we decided to collapse all instances where the recipient reported receiving more than the provider reported giving to zero. To reiterate, each individual had a daily score for how much unacknowledged support they provided to and invisible support they received from their spouse.

## Overview of Analyses

Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was used to test the proposed hypotheses. According to Kreft’s (1996) recommendations, the current analyses with 100 individuals at seven time points should have adequate statistical power. Because the sample consists of couples, HLM analyses were conducted using a two-intercept model as recommended by Raudenbush, Brennan, and Barnett (1995). The two-intercept model was chosen because the dyads were distinguishable and because it allows us to test whether the husband and wife variances are equal and whether the covariance is significantly different from zero (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Specifically, in a two-intercept model at Level-1, dummy variables are introduced for both husbands and wives. Terms are then created separately for husbands and wives with reported provision (PROV) and unacknowledged provision (UNA) and reported receipt (REC) and invisible receipt (INV). Analyses were conducted separately for provision and receipt of support. We chose to conduct an analysis on the difference scores between actor and partner reports of emotional support as opposed to a moderation model where actor and partner reports interacted. This decision was made because our focus for this study is on whether discordance versus concordance between the two reports of emotional support impacts well-being. Before testing our hypotheses, unconditional models were conducted at Level-1 for each outcome. These analyses determined that there was significant within-person variance in each outcome, which then allowed us to conduct conditional models. See Table 1 for bivariate correlations of the aggregated study variables reported separately for husbands and wives.

## Results

Before the HLM analyses, gender differences in provision and receipt of emotional support were examined with aggregated data (across the 7-day diary) using ANCOVA analyses, controlling for years married, mean couple education, household income, and parental status. No significant gender differences were found in the amount of reported emotional support receipt or provision or for invisible emotional support re-

Table 1  
Correlations for Major Study Variables (n = 100)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Husbands</b>							
1. Provision reported support	—						
2. Provision invisible support	.27***	—					
3. Receipt reported support	.82***	.13*	—				
4. Receipt invisible support	-.36***	-.34***	-.50***	—			
5. Anxiety	-.36***	-.11*	-.39***	.17**	—		
6. Depression	-.21***	.06	-.30***	.07	.46***	—	
7. Positive mood	.50***	.11	.51***	-.30***	-.45***	-.34***	—
<b>Wives</b>							
1. Provision reported support	—						
2. Provision invisible support	.36***	—					
3. Receipt reported support	.83***	.31***	—				
4. Receipt invisible support	-.41***	-.34***	-.54***	—			
5. Anxiety	-.37***	-.05	-.31***	.19***	—		
6. Depression	-.30***	.02	-.27***	.15**	.63***	—	
7. Positive mood	.56***	.14**	.51***	-.23***	-.52***	-.45***	—

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

ceipt or unacknowledged emotional support provision. Wives ( $M = 1.46, SD = .66$ ) were found to be marginally more depressed than husbands ( $M = 1.28, SD = .34$ ),  $F(1, 99) = 3.04, p = .08$ .

For the conditional HLM analyses, we found, as predicted, that reported emotional support receipt was strongly related to well-being while invisible support receipt showed limited links with well-being. Specifically, *reported* emotional support receipt was related to less depression and anxiety and greater positive mood for

both husbands and wives (see Table 2). *Invisible* emotional support receipt, on the other hand, was only related to less anxiety for husbands, with wives showing a similar but marginal relation to anxiety ( $b = -.18, SE = .09, p = .06$ ).

Our predictions were also supported for support provision, such that unacknowledged emotional support provision was related to less well-being whereas reported emotional support provision was related to better well-being. Specifically, as shown in Table 2, for both husbands and wives, *reported* emotional

Table 2  
Relation of Visibility of Spousal Support to Well-Being

	Positive mood		Anxiety		Depression	
	<i>b</i>	( <i>SE</i> )	<i>b</i>	( <i>SE</i> )	<i>b</i>	( <i>SE</i> )
Husbands' intercept	2.85***	(.09)	1.48***	(.06)	1.28***	(.05)
Wives' intercept	2.77***	(.09)	1.59***	(.08)	1.45***	(.09)
<b>Support provision model</b>						
Husbands' reported	.34***	(.07)	-.36***	(.07)	-.14**	(.05)
Husbands' unacknowledged	-.14	(.09)	.14†	(.08)	.10	(.07)
Wives' reported	.47***	(.05)	-.41***	(.06)	-.29***	(.06)
Wives' unacknowledged	-.11	(.07)	.14†	(.08)	.17*	(.08)
<b>Support receipt model</b>						
Husbands' reported	.35***	(.07)	-.40***	(.07)	-.24**	(.07)
Husbands' invisible	-.06	(.07)	-.22*	(.09)	-.08	(.07)
Wives' reported	.43***	(.06)	-.33***	(.07)	-.17*	(.08)
Wives' invisible	.09	(.09)	-.18†	(.09)	-.11	(.13)

Note. The variables in the table above are group-mean centered.  
†  $p < .10$ . \*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

support provision was related to greater positive mood and less depression and anxiety. *Unacknowledged* emotional support provision, on the other hand, was related to more depression for wives, but not for husbands; it was also marginally related to more anxiety in both husbands and wives (Husbands:  $b = .14$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .06$ ; Wives:  $b = .14$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .09$ ).

With respect to gender differences in our HLM analyses, hypothesis testing of the slopes revealed very few gender differences. Only two marginal findings were observed: *reported provision* of emotional support showed a stronger impact on wives' depression (Wives:  $\beta = -.29$ ; Husbands:  $\beta = -.14$ ;  $\chi^2(1, n = 100) = 3.16$ ,  $p = .07$ ) and positive mood (Wives:  $\beta = .47$ ; Husbands:  $\beta = .34$ ;  $\chi^2(1, n = 100) = 2.37$ ,  $p = .12$ ) than husbands' depression and positive mood.

## Discussion

Our study is the first, to date, to examine the role of emotional support visibility on daily well-being in newly married couples. We found that whereas reported emotional support provision is related to better well-being, unacknowledged emotional support provision is related to worse well-being. Moreover, our results suggest that reported emotional support receipt was strongly related to better well-being, but invisible emotional support receipt was only minimally related to well-being. In other words, our findings suggest three things: (1) emotional support receipt and provision are both important predictors of well-being, (2) visibility of support does matter for well-being, and (3) emotional spousal support appears to act similarly for husbands and wives. Each of these findings will be elaborated on in the following discussion.

First, in accordance with prior research, reported support provision was related to less depression and anxiety and greater positive mood for both husbands and wives. As the prior literature suggests, providing support may be beneficial for well-being because it increases feelings of self-esteem and, in the context of marriage, positive feelings about the partner and the status of the relationship. Similarly, but somewhat contradictory with prior research, reported support receipt was related to less de-

pression and anxiety and greater positive mood for both husbands and wives. Prior literature has suggested that support receipt can lead to negative outcomes because of engendered feelings of incompetence and lower self-esteem (Helgeson, 1993). However, Vangelisti (2009) argues that emotional support in positive situations is connected with feelings of love and appreciation by one's partner—not to issues of competence. Thus, our positive link between daily reported emotional support receipt and well-being is in line with Vangelisti's argument.

Our second finding nuances the picture a bit more by adding in the dimension of support visibility. As predicted, *unacknowledged* support provision was related to more anxiety and depression, whereas *invisible* support receipt was not linked with well-being. Moreover, taken as a whole, the results were strongest for reported (i.e., visible) support as opposed to invisible/unacknowledged support. This study is the first to examine the issue of invisible support with respect to provision, as well as in a daily context. Contrary to Bolger and colleagues, we found few benefits for invisible support receipt and several negative consequences for unacknowledged (i.e., invisible) support provision. One explanation for these results can be found in the central issue of importance in communal relationships—the demonstration and acknowledgment of caring and love between individuals (Clark & Mills, 1979). With *unacknowledged* emotional support provision, a provider may feel unappreciated if his or her efforts at emotional support go unnoticed by the spouse. Moreover, in our study, we focused on couples in daily life (as opposed to those experiencing a specific stressor). Thus, couples may have concentrated more on day-to-day positive support interactions with their spouse and what these reflect about the quality of their relationship. Future research is needed to replicate these results and to more systematically examine the role of support visibility within the context of receipt and provision, as well as in various types of situations (e.g., positive and negative experiences, acute vs. chronic stressors, and daily hassles) and relationships (e.g., romantic, friendship, and familial).

Finally, we predicted there would be gender differences in our results, such that husbands would benefit most from *receiving* emotional support, whereas wives would benefit most

from *providing* emotional support. However, our analyses revealed no significant gender differences. The lack of gender differences may suggest emotional spousal support processes may be similar for husbands and wives—especially in the early years of marriage as communication and support styles are still developing. Before concluding that husbands and wives are similar, these results need to be replicated in a larger sample of married couples. Future research should compare the emotional spousal support process (i.e., receipt, provision, and visibility) in the early years of marriage, middle years of marriage, and later years of marriage. Over time, couples may fall into a rhythm or routine whereby invisible or unacknowledged support provision and receipt are more common as certain acts or behaviors are taken for granted; also, they may not require awareness of supportive interactions as much to reaffirm the strength of their relationship.

While the current study helps to expand the literature by examining visibility of emotional support provision and receipt on multiple well-being outcomes in a daily diary design, there are several limitations that should be addressed. First, our sample size was limited; thus, future studies need to replicate these findings in a larger sample of married couples in various stages of marriage. Second, we only examined emotional support; future studies would benefit from also examining instrumental spousal support. Visibility of instrumental spousal support (as assessed by division of household labor) may show very different results for receipt versus provision than those found for emotional support. Third, as with all diary studies, issues of sensitization and priming are a concern. In other words, by asking participants to keep a journal they may have been primed to notice support they might have otherwise overlooked. Finally, future studies should attempt to examine emotional support through more objective methods, as opposed to relying solely on self and spousal reports. Research may also want to address different ways to operationalize visibility of support. Specifically, the current study may have measured support that was intended but did not occur; future research needs to assess intention to provide support. Finally, our study sought to expand the research on invisible support by focusing on the role of unacknowledged provision and invisible receipt on daily

well-being in newly married couples. As such, we chose not to examine the issue of “overacknowledged” support provision and receipt in the current study. However, we feel it is important for support researchers to examine the idea of overacknowledged support (i.e., when the recipient reports more support being received than the provider reports giving). To our knowledge, this construct has not been examined in the prior literature; yet, the implications of overacknowledged support are important in completing our understanding of the role of support visibility on well-being.

Our study gives important insight into the dyadic interplay between support provision and receipt. Additionally, it expands on previous work done by Bolger and colleagues on invisible support by addressing the issue of invisible (i.e., unacknowledged) support provision. Even so, many unanswered questions remain. For example, invisible support has been defined as a support exchange where providers report support has been made available but the recipient does not encode the support transaction as having taken place (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). In our study, with regard to measuring provision of unacknowledged support, it was unclear whether providers were truly aware their support attempts were going unnoticed. In some cases, support provision is intended to be acknowledged. Yet, in other cases, a provider may make a conscious decision to provide support in a way that is not encoded by the recipient. Future research needs to examine both types of unacknowledged support provision (i.e., intended and not intended) to determine whether both are negatively related to well-being.

To conclude, our study provides preliminary evidence for the importance of examining both support receipt and provision in marital exchanges, as well as understanding the impact of support visibility on both the provider and recipient. Findings from the current study are important not only in terms of spousal support research, but also for its potential clinical implications in terms of understanding how couples support and communicate with one another. Marital therapy and marriage interventions need to address the issue of unacknowledged support provision on well-being and give couples ways of letting their partner know that they are providing

support, and/or help them to understand why their support provision is not being interpreted or encoded as support by their partner. In marriage, as well as other relationships, what both parties report and perceive in terms of support is crucial to understanding the complex dynamics of relationships.

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