

Gender and Social Support: Taking the Bad with the Good?

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In examining past research, a paradox can be found in the relationships between gender, social support, and depression. Although women report higher levels of depression than men, they also generally report more social support—a factor found to reduce depressive symptoms. In efforts to explain this seeming inconsistency, it was hypothesized that women report both more support and more depression because they are more likely than men to experience both positive and negative aspects of social relationships. Based on a community sample of predominantly Caucasian respondents, findings indicate that greater perceived support among women can be explained by more frequent contact with network members and a tendency to possess relationships characterized by greater intimacy, emotional disclosure, and empathy. However, women also report more frequent negative interactions with network members and are more adversely affected by marital conflict than are men. While negative interactions and conflict cannot account for gender differences in depression, they do help to explain how women can experience both more support and more depression. Among women, the health-enhancing effects of support on depression may be balanced by the detrimental effect of conflict.

The importance of social relationships and companionship for the well-being of humans, while quite thoroughly established, continues to represent an area of increasing interest. Indeed, “social support” has become a familiar and a widely used concept within a variety of social science, health, and service-related fields. Much of the research into social support has focused on its protective effects against psychological distress and disorder. A vast body of literature shows impressive evidence for the direct and

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stress-buffering effects of social support on psychological health, particularly with respect to depression (see Barrera, 1986, Broadhead et al., 1983, and Turner, 1983, for reviews). Through analyses of a secondary data set, this paper considers how gender may structure the conditions and circumstances that influence both social support and depression by examining a paradox in typically reported associations between gender, support, and depression.

Gender and Support

A number of investigators have acknowledged gender variations in the nature of interpersonal relationships (Barnett, Biener, & Baruch, 1987; Belle, 1982). Indeed, there is considerable literature suggesting that gender, perhaps more than any other social status variable, is significantly associated with a number of factors and conditions relevant to the acquisition and experience of social support (Vaux, 1985, 1988). Specifically, it appears that men and women often differ in both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of their relationships, including the size and composition of their social networks, the amount of support they report receiving, and the degree of emotional exchange and intimacy that characterize their relationships.

Quantitative indices of network structure often show women to have significantly larger networks than men (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Campbell, 1980; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981; Fischer, 1982). In particular, women tend to maintain more kin relationships (Booth, 1972; Marsden, 1987; Fischer, 1982). In addition to these network characteristics, women generally report receiving more social support than do men (Burda, Vaux, & Schill, 1984; Butler, Giordano, & Neren, 1985; Leavy, 1983). Women may be particularly advantaged in receiving emotional support (Hirsch, 1979; Stokes & Wilson, 1984; Burda et al., 1984).

The sources of support also appear to vary by gender. For example, women are more likely to report a confidant relationship than are men, but are much less likely to identify their spouse as a confidant (Lowerthal & Haven, 1968). Consistent with this finding, several studies have found that women experience more support from same-gender friends, whereas men rely heavily upon their wives for support (Bell, 1981; Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Veroff et al., 1981; Fischer, 1982). That men tend to benefit more from being married, in terms of their physical and mental health, is also consistent with these findings (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Gove, 1978). Taken together, the evidence suggests that women may be both better providers of support and the recipients of more supportive transactions.

It is likely that gender variations in support are, in part, affected by gender role orientation. Gender roles inevitably impact social interaction patterns. Bem (1987) describes the masculine role as "instrumental," characterized by independence and rationality, while the feminine role is "expressive," emphasizing compassion and supportiveness. Thus, feminine characteristics appear more compatible with seeking and providing social support. Indeed, findings show that women are more likely to emphasize intimacy and disclosure in their relationships than are men (Bell, 1981). While norms for appropriate male behavior tend to inhibit help seeking, emotional expressiveness, and self-disclosure (DePaulo, 1982; Lowenthal & Haven, 1968), women are encouraged to develop intimate relationships that promote nurturance and emotional exchange (Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982). Consistent with these themes, Burda et al. (1984) found that individuals with a feminine orientation report receiving more emotional support than individuals with a less expressive orientation.

As indicated in the preceding discussion, there is evidence suggesting that women possess certain characteristics and social resources that may place them at an advantage for perceiving and experiencing social support (Vaux, 1985, 1988; Ensel, 1986; Fusilier, Ganster, & Mayes, 1986; Turner & Wood, 1985). Since subjective perceptions of being supported, rather than actual "supportive" behaviors, appear most beneficial for psychological well-being (Barrera, 1986; House, 1981; Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990; Wethington & Kessler, 1986), information on the determinants of perceived support is especially important. One objective of this paper is to identify relationship qualities or network characteristics that influence support perceptions across gender and to assess how these may assist in explaining gender variations in perceived social support.

Gender and Depression

Numerous studies on both community and clinical samples have consistently shown women to have higher rates of psychological distress, including depression, in comparison to men (Al-Issa, 1992; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1976; Myers, Lindenthal, & Pepper, 1984; Weissman & Klerman, 1977). In fact, it has been estimated that women have as much as twice the rate of depression as men (Kessler & McRae, 1981). While there is still some debate concerning this relationship, there is strong evidence suggesting that gender differences in depression are social in origin, arising from the qualities and/or response to social conditions and experiences (cf. Aneshensel, Frerichs, & Clark, 1981; Turner & Avison, 1989).

Most research seeking to explain gender differences in depression can be placed within one of two dominant hypotheses (Kessler, Price, & Wortman, 1985). The "exposure hypothesis" suggests that women are more often depressed than men because their different roles expose them to greater numbers of stressors or chronic strains (Gove, 1972; Gove, 1978; Gove & Geerken, 1977; Radloff, 1977; Rosenfield, 1980). Alternatively, the "vulnerability hypothesis" proposes that women have higher rates of depression not because they are more exposed to stressors, but because they are more vulnerable to the deleterious effects of stress (Kessler, 1979; Kessler & McLeod, 1984).

Although a number of intriguing ideas have been brought forth and examined, providing useful directions for further research, the gender-depression relationship remains largely unresolved. That is, while findings showing higher rates of depression among women are quite clear and consistent, explanations for this association are, at best, incomplete. A second objective of this paper is to identify network factors that may influence depression and assess how such factors may help explain gender differences in depression.

A Paradox

The evidence reviewed above reveals a kind of paradox in the relationships between gender, support, and depression. While it appears that women often experience more social support than men, they also consistently report higher levels of depression. Thus despite the evidence for the positive effects of support on psychological well-being, women are still disadvantaged with respect to depression.

This paper considers the relationships among gender, support, and depression in an effort to unravel this apparent paradox. While a number of factors likely contribute to this pattern of associations, it is hypothesized that the negative side of social relationships may be implicated. Just as social support may differ for men and women, so too may negative interaction experiences be differentially distributed across gender. Women may experience both more support and more depression, in part, because of a duality inherent in their involvement in social relationships. That is, the quantity and quality of relationships allowing women to experience support may also expose and/or make them more vulnerable to the negative and stressful aspects of relationships.

This hypothesis is based on the possibility that more intensive and extensive emotional involvement in relationships not only increases the potential for supportive interactions, but also for negative, conflictive ones. When considering the effects of network contact, one cannot assume all interactions are positive. Negative interactions constitute an important share of the problems people experience in their daily lives (Pearlin, 1982; Rook, 1984; Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Shilling, 1989). For example, although positive associations between marriage and well-being have often been attributed to the presence of social support, it is clear that marriage can also be a substantial source of conflict (Croog, 1970; Pearlin & Turner, 1987). Notably, items on life events inventories that reflect negative interactions with one's spouse rank among the most stressful. Paykel, Myers, Dienelt, Klerman, Lindenthal, & Pepper, (1969) found that the item "increase in arguments with spouse" most powerfully distinguished depressed patients from community controls. Moreover, the item "relations with spouse changed for the worse, without divorce or separation" is one of the ten most highly weighted in the PERI life events scale (Dohrenwend, Krasnoff, Askenasky, & Dohrenwend, 1978). In Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, and Lazarus (1981) daily hassles measure, items such as "difficulties with friends," "troublesome neighbors," and "problems getting along with fellow workers" also figure prominently in predicting distress.

The potential importance of distinguishing between positive and negative interactions is highlighted by the relative strength of the impact of conflictive relations on well-being. Barrera's (1981) study of pregnant teenagers, Rook's (1984) study of elderly widows, and Fiore, Becker, and Coppel's (1983) study of Alzheimer's care givers all found that measures of conflictive social relations explained more variance in psychological outcomes than did measures of supportive relations.

Importantly, negative interactions have been found to have little overlap with supportive ones (Rook, 1984; Barrera, 1981). Positive or supportive interactions and negative or conflictive interactions appear to represent relatively independent dimensions, not simply opposite ends of the same continuum. As a result, one can potentially experience both a high level of support and frequent negative interactions. As some authors have pointed out (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986; Sarason et al., 1990), support that comes from conflict-filled relationships may exact a toll high enough to eliminate any positive qualities.

If women, because of their greater emotional involvement in relationships, experience elevated conflict as well as support, the detrimental impact of negative interactions on well-being may outweigh the positive effects of obtaining more support.

Research Questions

In this paper a series of analyses are conducted to address the following questions: (1) Do women report higher levels of support in comparison to men, and if so, can these differences be explained by gender variations, network characteristics, or relationship qualities? (2) Do women experience more negative interactions or conflict with network members in comparison to men, and if so, do such experiences contribute to gender differences in depression?

METHOD

The data employed were obtained as a part of a study on social and psychological adjustment and the correlates of such adjustment among the physically disabled (see Turner & Noh, 1988). In 1981–1982, a representative sample of physically disabled adults from ten counties of Southwestern Ontario, Canada, was obtained through a two-stage cluster sampling technique. Investigators randomly selected Canadian Census Enumeration Areas and then selected every n th household within each area from a random start. Rural households were deliberately oversampled. Screening interviews were conducted at over 10,000 households to identify respondents with physical impairments. A total of 967 interviews with physically disabled individuals were conducted, representing 70% of all those identified as disabled. Follow-up interviews were conducted four years later in 1985–1986.

The comparison sample was assembled during this second wave. Cases matched with the original 967 respondents on age, gender, and area of residence were randomly selected from the 1981–1982 census records for the same ten counties. Contact letters were sent and potential respondents were telephoned about one week later for a screening interview. The same question used to identify disabled subjects was used to screen for nondisabled individuals. Comparison subjects were not included if they or any member of their household had a self-defined physical disability. A total of 850 comparison respondents were successfully interviewed. Because respondents were matched to disabled subjects on age and gender, this sample understandably has a greater number of older people and a slightly higher proportion of women than one would find in a random sample of the community. Approximately 97% of respondents are Caucasian, reflecting the race distribution of the sampled area.

Table I. Sample Characteristics

	<i>N</i>	%	<i>X</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age			59.6 (median = 63.0)	15.5
Gender				
Male	387	45.5		
Female	463	54.5		
Education (years)			11.8 (median = 12.0)	3.4
Marital status				
Single	48	5.6		
Married	624	73.6		
Separated/divorced	41	4.8		
Widowed	137	16.1		
Employment status				
Full time	307	35.5		
Part time	102	12.2		
Retired	283	33.3		
Unemployed/housewife	151	17.7		
Other	12	1.4		

The analyses reported here utilize only the data obtained from this comparison sample of nondisabled subjects, the characteristics of which are displayed in Table I.

Measures

Sociodemographics. Gender and employment status are dummy variables (female = 1, male = 0; currently employed part or full time = 1, not currently employed = 0). Age is measured in years and education is measured by years of schooling completed. Marital status is coded into 3 dummy variables (single, divorced/separated, widowed), with married representing the comparison group.

Social Support. Perceived social support was assessed using the Provisions of Social Relations (PSR) Scale, designed to reflect the "provisions" of social relationships conceptualized by Weiss (1974). Items intended to measure perceptions concerning 5 of the 6 support provisions (attachment, social integration, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, and guidance) were constructed, creating a 15-item scale. Sample items include the following: "People who know me trust me and respect me"; "No matter what happens, I know my family will always be there for me should I need them"; and "When I'm with my friends I am completely able to relax and be my-

self." Individuals respond to each statement on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all like me* to *very much like me*. The alpha coefficient for the total scale is .78. The measure has also shown good construct validity in earlier studies (Turner, Frankel, & Levin, 1983).

Network Size. Respondents were asked to indicate (1) the number of family members or relatives living close by (within an hour's drive), and (2) the number of friends living close by (within an hour's drive). For the purpose of the present analyses, these two values were combined to determine the total number of individuals in the proximal network.

Network Contact. A variable indicating the frequency of contact with network members was also constructed in order to assess the intensity of respondents' network involvement. Respondents indicated how often they see or talk to network members on the phone. Individuals responded on a 5-point scale ranging from *daily* to *I hardly ever see or talk to them*. Contact with friends and family were combined to indicate frequency of contact with the network as a whole.

Confidants. In addition to examining indices of network size and contact, the availability of confidants was also assessed. Respondents were asked "among all your family and friends, is there someone in whom you can confide and with whom you can share your most private thoughts?" If respondents answered "yes," they were then asked if there was anyone else in whom they could confide. A 3-point measure representing number of confidants was constructed (0: *no confidant*; 1: *one confidant only*; 2: *at least 2 confidants*).

Emotional Disclosure. Emotional disclosure was assessed with the item "How much can you really open up to him/her/them without having to hold back on your feelings?" Respondents answered on a 5-point scale ranging from *a great deal* to *very little if at all*. Individuals having no confidants were given a score of zero on this item.

Empathy. Although empathy represents a characteristic of individuals, it can also reflect a quality of that individual's relationships. Specifically, empathic individuals are likely to have relationships characterized by greater emotional intensity and involvement. Empathy is assessed with a 7-item scale developed by Kessler at the University of Michigan. Sample items include the following: "I tend to get emotionally involved with friends' problems," "I am usually aware of the feelings of other people," and "I feel that other people ought to take care of their own problems themselves." Respondents rate each statement on 5-point scale ranging from *very much like me* to *not at all like me*. The alpha for this scale is .72 in the present study.

Depression. Depression was assessed with a measure of depressive symptomatology developed by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). Respondents indicated how often they had experienced each of 20 symptoms on 4-point scale ranging from *rarely or none*

of the time to most or all of the time. The validity and reliability of this scale are well established (Radloff, 1977). In the present study, Cronbach's (1951) alpha coefficient for the CES-D is .87.

Negative Interaction. A measure developed by Rook (1984) was used to assess the frequency with which respondents experience negative interactions with network members. The original measure consisted of two 8-item scales designed to assess both negative and positive interactions, one with reference to family and relatives, the other regarding friendships. Factor analyses revealed two very distinct dimensions (positive and negative) in both the family interaction and friendship interaction measures. These results are consistent with Rook's (1984) contention that support and conflict represent two independent constructs and are not simply opposite ends of the support continuum.

The present study uses the negative interaction items only, combining those that arise from family/relatives and friends. Sample items include the following: How often do they... "get on your nerves," "make too many demands on you," and "create tensions or arguments while you are around them." This scale, representing the frequency of negative interactions with all members of the network, yielded an alpha coefficient of .78.

Conflict Events. Interpersonal conflict events were measured with three conflict-related occurrences or situations selected from an extensive life events inventory (see Turner & Avison, 1989). Respondents indicated whether they had experienced conflictive interactions within the past year with the following: "people at work"; "your spouse or other household member"; and "a close friend, relative or neighbor, not living in your home." The resulting measure ranges from 0 to 3 representing a summary of conflict occurrences from these three sources.

Marital Conflict. The extent of marital disagreement or conflict was also assessed, using a shortened version of the Locke and Wallace Relationship Scale (Locke & Wallace, 1959). Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with their mate on a series of issues (e.g., handling family finances, demonstrations of affection, ways of dealing with in-laws). Individuals responded to each of the 6 items on a 6-point scale, ranging from *always agree* to *always disagree*. A summary score of the 6 items was constructed. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale is .76 in the present study.

RESULTS

The bivariate correlations, means, and standard deviations of all the variables are presented in Table A of the Appendix. The associations be-

tween gender, social support, and depression are all statistically significant and in the expected directions. Gender and social support show a correlation of .10 ($p < .01$), with women reporting significantly more support than men. Women also report more depressive symptoms than men ($r = .12, p < .001$), and as expected, social support is negatively associated with depression ($r = -.36; p < .001$). It is also worth noting that the magnitude of the relationship between social support and depression is not significantly different for men ($r = -.41$) and women ($r = -.37; p > .05$). Thus, the paradox within the gender, support, and depression associations *cannot* simply be explained by gender differences in the effect of social support on depression.

Gender and the Determinants of Social Support

To examine the relationships between social support, gender, and a number of additional factors hypothesized to influence social support, analyses proceeded in two stages.

First, regression analyses were performed to determine the independent effect of gender on five different factors hypothesized to be relevant to perceived social support. Specifically, each of the five hypothesized support determinants (network size, frequency of network contact, number of confidants, empathy, and emotional disclosure) were separately regressed on the following base model consisting of gender and a set of sociodemographic control variables:

$$Y = b_1(\text{female}) + b_2(\text{age}) + b_3(\text{education}) + b_4(\text{employment}) \\ + b_5(\text{divorced}) + b_6(\text{widowed})$$

Except for network size, gender is related to all the hypothesized support determinants, independent or other sociodemographic factors. Specifically, women report more frequent contact with their networks ($b = .49; SE b = .14; p < .001$), more confidant relationships ($b = .20; SE b = .05; p < .001$), higher empathy ($b = .48; SE b = .05; p < .001$), and greater emotional disclosure ($b = .18; SE b = .07; p < .01$) than do men. These analyses suggest that women may be advantaged in terms of social network resources, in addition to having greater emotional intensity in their relationships.

In order to determine if the five network and relationship quality factors affect perceived social support and whether these characteristics help explain the positive association between being female and experiencing support, a second set of analyses was performed. These analyses are presented in Table II.

Table II. Network/Relationship Quality Predictors of Social Support Unstandardized Regression Coefficients

	Step 1	Step 2
Gender	.105 ^d (.035)	-.010 (.034)
Network size		.000 (.000)
Network contact		.042 ^d (.008)
No. of confidants		.093 ^c (.035)
Empathy		.125 ^d (.024)
Emotional disclosure ^a		.068 ^d (.014)
<i>R</i> ²	.019 ^b	.206 ^d

^aRespondents with no confidants score zero on this variable.

^b*p* < .05.

^c*p* < .01.

^d*p* < .001.

In the first step of a hierarchical regression, perceived social support was regressed on the same base model involving gender and the other sociodemographic control variables. Gender shows significant independent effects on social support. In the second step, the five hypothesized support determinants were entered into the equation. Network contact, number of confidants, empathy, and emotional disclosure all show independent positive effects on perceived social support. Further, with these factors entered into the equation, the association between gender and support is no longer significant and is reduced in magnitude to near zero. Thus, the higher support scores among women are explained by the relationship between gender and each of these support determinants. Indeed, the only one of these six factors not associated with support perceptions (network size) was also unrelated to gender. From these findings, it appears that gender differences in perceived social support may be a function of gender variations in the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of relationships.

Analyses presented earlier showed that women scored significantly higher on the confidant variable than did men. As discussed previously, it has been suggested that women may not only be advantaged in receiving social support, but may also be more effective, or at least more frequent, providers of social support (emotional support, in particular). If this is true, one might expect women not only to have more confidants available to them, but also to serve as confidants more often. Table III shows the dis-

Table III. Number and Gender of Confidants

	Men (%)	Women (%)
Zero confidants	13.2	6.9
One confidant only	14.5	6.9
Two or more confidants	72.4	86.2
Primary confidant female	49.7	75.3
Primary confidant male	50.3	24.7
Primary confidant spouse ^a	34.6	23.5

^aMarried respondents only.

tribution of the confidant variable for men and women in addition to the gender of the respondent's primary confidant.

It is evident that, while most people have confidants, men are almost twice as likely as women to report having no confidant at all. Moreover, among those that have an available confidant, men are twice as likely as women to have *only* one confidant. Hence, if the primary confidant is unavailable, women are more likely than men to have at least one additional person in whom they can confide and share their problems.

As expected, the gender of the primary (or first choice) confidant among women was very likely to be another woman. Men, however, do not appear to have the same preference for same-gender confidants. Instead, they were equally likely to have a women as their primary confidant as they were to have a male confidant. Although the majority of married respondents did *not* report their spouse as their primary confidant, men were more likely to chose their wives than the reverse.

Although the data do not allow a direct examination of gender differences in respondents' giving of support, the findings do suggest that women, in general, may function more often as emotional supporters.

Gender and the Determinants of Depression

Preceding analyses support the hypothesis that higher levels of perceived social support among women are explained by gender differences in social resources and emotional involvement in relationships. It is also hypothesized, however, that relationships characterized by greater quantitative and qualitative involvement may have potential for harm as well as good. Specifically, it is hypothesized that having such relationships may also increase the likelihood that conflict occurs or that one is negatively affected

by such conflict. If this is so, we might also expect women to experience more negative network interactions and to be more distressed by those interactions in comparison to men.

In order to determine whether women are more likely to experience the negative side of social relationships, three factors (frequency of negative interactions with network, interpersonal conflict events, and marital conflict) were each regressed on the base model consisting of gender and the sociodemographic controls. Results indicate that women have significantly more negative interactions with network members relative to men ($b = .19$; $SE\ b = .07$; $p < .01$), independent of other sociodemographic characteristics. Additionally, the relationship between gender and conflict events approaches statistical significance ($b = .05$; $SE\ b = .03$; $p = .07$), with women reporting more conflict events than men. No association between gender and marital conflict was evident.

The next objective is to determine whether these gender differences in network conflict variables help explain the association between gender and depression. To accomplish this, regression analyses were performed in which variables or sets of variables were added to or eliminated from the equation in a stepwise fashion. Results are presented in Table IV.

In the first step, depression was regressed on the base equation (gender, age, education, employment status, marital status). As expected, gender shows an independent association with depression, with women reporting significantly more symptoms than men.

In the second step, perceived social support was added to the equation. As shown in Table IV, support has a clear inverse relationship to depression, controlling for sociodemographic variables. Moreover, gender remains a significant predictor, controlling for gender differences in sup-

Table IV. Negative Interaction/Conflict Predictors of Depression Unstandardized Regression Coefficients ($SE\ b$)

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Gender	1.29 ^a (.553)	2.01 ^c (.514)	.79 (.529)	1.571 ^b (.509)
Social support		-5.92 (.501)		-4.99 ^c (.518)
Negative interaction with network			2.05 ^c (.254)	1.27 ^c (.255)
Conflict events			2.52 ^c (.636)	2.28 ^c (.605)
R^2	.051 ^c	.185	.139	.225 ^c

^a $p < .05$.

^b $p < .01$.

^c $p < .001$.

port. Since women report more perceived support and support is negatively related to depression, the inclusion of support in the equation functions to strengthen the association between gender and depression. In other words, the effect of being female on depression is even greater when controlling for the beneficial effects of having more support.

In the third step, perceived support was removed from the equation, and negative network interaction and conflict events were added. Findings show that each of these two factors independently account for a significant portion of variance in depression. Moreover, the association between gender and depression is reduced to nonsignificance when these conflict factors are controlled.

In the final step, perceived support, negative network interaction, conflict events, and the sociodemographic variables were all included in the equation. With *both* social support and conflict factors in the model, the gender–depression relationship regains statistical significance and reaches a magnitude similar to the association in Step 1 when neither support or conflict were considered. Thus, among women, it appears that the positive effect of greater social support and the negative influence of more network conflict may cancel each other out.

It is possible that the remaining gender–depression relationship could be accounted for by a stronger positive association between conflict and depression among women or by a stronger negative relationship between social support and depression among men. To examine this possibility, a set of three statistical interactions terms were entered into the equation (Gender \times Network Conflict; Gender \times Conflict Events; Gender \times Social Support). None of these interactions were statistically significant.

To allow the inclusion of marital strain as a predictor of depression, the above analyses were repeated for married respondents only. As expected, the first step of the regression analysis showed a significant relationship between gender and depression ($b = 1.926$; $SE\ b = 0.622$; $p < .001$), independent of other sociodemographic factors. In the second step, support was added to the equation, producing a significant negative association $b = -5.505$; $SE\ b = .601$; $p < .001$). In these analyses, as in the preceding full sample analyses, gender still showed a significant effect on depression with support in the equation ($b = 2.311$; $SE\ b = 0.585$; $p < .001$). In the third step, support was taken away from the equation and three conflict factors (negative network interaction, conflict events, marital conflict) were added. All these factors, including marital conflict ($b = 2.818$; $SE\ b = .482$; $p < .001$), showed positive independent associations with depression. However, unlike in the preceding analyses involving the entire sample, conflict factors did not account for the gender difference in depression among the married subsample. The gender coefficient remained statistically significant when conflict variables were controlled. As in the preceding analyses, the final

step involved the inclusion of gender, the sociodemographic controls, the three conflict factors, and support all in the regression equation. All factors, including gender, remained statistically significant in the expected directions.

Although earlier analyses found no gender differences in the *level* of marital conflict reported, men and women could be differentially affected by marital conflict. To test this possibility, the interaction between gender and marital conflict was examined among the married subsample. Results indicated a significant statistical interaction involving marital conflict ($p < .01$), with women being more adversely affected by marital conflict than men. That is, the association between marital conflict and depression is significantly greater for women [$b(\text{men}) = .71$; $b(\text{women}) = 3.27$]. However, again, when support was also included in the equation, gender continued to have a direct effect on depression.

Summary

The first goal of this study was to identify gender variation in quantitative network characteristics and indices of emotional involvement in relationships, and to assess whether such differences could account for gender variations in social support. Among the factors hypothesized to influence social support, all but one show gender variations. Specifically, women report significantly greater contact with network members, more confidants, greater empathy, and more emotional disclosure than men, independent of other sociodemographic factors. These same network and relationship qualities show independent, positive associations with social support and account for the gender–support association. Thus, these factors appear to represent intervening variables in the relationship between gender and social support.

The second objective was to examine gender differences in negative or conflictive network relations and determine whether such differences help explain gender variations in depression. Results show that women report significantly more frequent negative interactions with network members. Interpersonal conflict events show a similar trend. Although negative network interactions and conflict events largely account for the gender–depression relationship when considered alone, gender differences in depression are still evident when support is also included in the equation.

While no gender differences in the level of marital conflict were reported, women appear to be more adversely affected by this source of conflict than are men. That is, the relationship between marital conflict and depression is significantly stronger among women. However, again, when gender differences in support are also accounted for, a direct effect of gender on depression is still evident.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support previous research showing gender differences in support, with women reporting greater perceived support than men. The present research suggests that higher social support among women may be a function of more frequent network contact and greater emotional involvement in network relations. Thus, it appears that women perceive more support because they tend to be involved in relationships characterized by greater contact, intimacy, empathy, and higher levels of emotional disclosure. Given these qualities, social ties among women are more likely to foster both the giving and receiving of emotional support.

However, despite experiencing more emotional support, women also appear to have greater exposure to the negative side of social relationships. Women experience more frequent negative interactions with network members, report more interpersonal conflict events, and are more vulnerable to marital strain, in comparison to men. While gender differences in conflict and support together cannot account for gender differences in depression, they may help explain the contradictory relationships between gender, social support, and depression. That is, the protective effects of support on depression appear to be balanced in part by the greater network conflict experienced by women.

While the reason for this is unclear, it may be that greater emotional involvement in relationships not only increases the potential for receiving emotional support, but also creates circumstances in which one becomes more exposed and/or vulnerable to negative interactions. Thus, factors that allow women to experience emotional support from their social ties may also increase their chances of being hurt by them.

The findings suggesting that women experience more adverse effects from network ties complement and expand upon earlier research by Kessler and Mcleod (1984) and Turner and Avison (1989). These investigators found that, in comparison to men, women are both more exposed and more vulnerable to undesirable life events that occur to network members. Thus, just as women are more likely to experience the detrimental effects of conflict that arise from network relations, so too are they more adversely affected by their network's problems and misfortunes. Indeed, it may be the tendency for women to serve more often as confidants that places them in the position of having to deal with the stressful experiences of others and the conflicts that may arise because of it. Future research would benefit from a more direct examination of the ways in which *providing* social support may influence the acquisition of support, exposure to conflict with network members, the development of chronic strains in the provider's life, and ultimately, psychological distress.

Evidence that women experience both more emotional support and more conflict lends support to the contention that the two constructs represent conceptually independent dimensions, and are not simply opposite ends of a continuum. However, it cannot be determined from these data whether support and conflict arise from the same sources or whether women tend to develop some highly supportive relationships, while having others that are more conflictive.

Although data on sources is limited, some evidence suggests that support and conflict within the marital relationship may function differently for men and women. For women, husbands appear to be a particularly influential source of conflict, but are not a common choice for a confidant relationship. Men, on the other hand, are less influenced by marital conflict, and are more likely to rely on their wives to fulfill the function of confidant. In fact, both men and women, married and unmarried, are more likely to rely on women for this function. Additional research is needed to further examine the source of support and conflict among women, both within and outside of family relationships.

It would be informative to expand on the present research by assessing how gender-related social roles influence both support and conflict processes. For example, it is generally women who assume the role of kin keeper—maintaining family ties and upholding familial obligations (Cumming & Lazer, 1981; Belle, 1982). Since the responsibilities that accompany this role usually require extending support, attending to other's needs, and dealing with family problems, women, by virtue of these role obligations may be more likely than men to experience conflict with and among family members. Further examination of the extent to which gender differences in support and conflict are a function of (1) variations in the types and qualities of social roles, (2) the level of demands associated with different roles, and (3) family norms concerning role expectations and obligations, may greatly assist our understanding of support and conflict processes. These role-related factors are likely to significantly govern the patterns and qualities of interaction with network members.

It would also be useful to determine more precisely the ways in which personal characteristics, such as empathy or femininity, influence support perceptions and how they may help specify the relationships between gender, support, and conflict. For example, in the context of the present study, it is unclear whether empathy represents qualities of understanding and emotional exchange within relationships or whether it simply reflects an individual disposition that heightens one's ability to perceive support and/or elevate one's vulnerability to conflict.

In sum, this research clearly shows the need to consider negative interactions in addition to and separate from social support when examining

Appendix A: Bivariate Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Age	1.0																
2. Gender ^a	-.019	1.0															
3. Education	-.304 ^c	.078 ^c	1.0														
4. Employed	-.593 ^c	-.194 ^d	.213 ^d	1.0													
5. Single ^b	-.168 ^d	.050	.183 ^d	.063	1.0												
6. Divorced/separated ^b	-.080 ^f	.040	.050	.105 ^d	-.055	1.0											
7. Widowed ^d	.393 ^d	.247 ^d	-.091 ^d	-.289 ^d	-.107 ^d	-.099 ^d	1.0										
8. Network size	-.010 ^d	-.062	-.040	.133 ^d	-.017	-.064	-.074 ^c	1.0									
9. Network contact	-.029	.142 ^d	-.144 ^d	.001	.008	-.002	.123 ^d	.123 ^d	1.0								
10. Empathy	-.241 ^d	.333 ^d	.198 ^d	.122 ^d	.010	.083 ^c	-.072 ^c	-.025	.113 ^d	1.0							
11. No. of confidants	-.040	.157 ^d	.027	-.013	-.045	.043	.041	-.030	-.123 ^d	-.117 ^d	1.0						
12. Emotional disclosure	.072 ^c	-.079 ^c	-.013	-.045	.043	-.003	.041	-.030	-.123 ^d	-.117 ^d	-.016	1.0					
13. Negative network interactions	-.414 ^d	.070 ^c	.130 ^d	.255 ^d	.046	-.013	-.188 ^d	.038	.026	.085 ^c	.009	.007	1.0				
14. Conflict events	-.296 ^d	.065	.056	.150 ^d	.026	.069 ^d	-.094 ^d	.039	.019	.146 ^d	-.006	-.034	.190 ^d	1.0			
15. Marital conflict	-.258 ^d	.016	.055	.132 ^d	—	—	—	-.011	-.017	-.006	-.030	.020	.310 ^d	.135 ^d	1.0		
16. Social support	.042	.096 ^d	-.021	-.004	-.033	-.047	.005	.074 ^c	.240 ^d	.193 ^d	.325 ^d	-.229 ^d	-.290 ^d	-.068 ^c	-.319 ^d	1.0	
17. Depression	-.093 ^d	.117 ^d	-.085 ^c	-.034	.029	.037	.041	-.058	.022	.038	-.115 ^d	.127 ^d	.283 ^d	.183 ^d	-.287 ^d	-.365 ^d	1.0
Mean	59.64	.55	11.82	.48	.06	.05	.16	19.26	3.44	3.58	.179	4.36	3.40	.15	5.09	4.26	6.96
Standard deviation	15.48	.50	3.41	.50	.23	.21	.37	20.80	.97	.68	.64	.91	1.06	.40	.61	.48	7.56

^aMen = 0; women = 1.

^bComparison group = married.

^c*p* < .05, two-tailed sign.

^d*p* < .01, two-tailed sign.

how social relationships affect health. The findings point to a number of interesting and important directions for future research on gender differences in health and processes relating to health.

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