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Family Communication Patterns and Social Support in Families of Origin
and Adult Children's Subsequent Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

Two studies investigated the correlations between family communication patterns and family social support and social support in adult children's subsequent romantic relationships. Results provide strong support for the hypothesis that conversation orientation in families is positively correlated with family social support and that conformity orientation is negatively correlated with social support. This negative correlation for conformity orientation is more evident for boys and in families when conversation orientation is low. Results also showed correlations between family social support and perceived social support in adult children's romantic relationships, suggesting that social support is an interpersonal skill acquired in families of origin. This finding applies in particular to boys, who depend more on their families for acquiring social support skills. Girls, in contrast, are less dependent on families in acquiring social support skills and seem to be able to acquire these skills outside the family as well.

Family Communication Patterns and Social Support in Families of Origin
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In recent years, research on family communication has increasingly focused on communication associated with more favorable outcomes for family members (e.g., resiliency, relational satisfaction, social adaptation) in addition to the more traditional focus on communication associated with unfavorable outcomes (e.g., divorce, violence, abuse). One of the consequences of this shift in focus has been an increased interest in social support, which can be defined as “verbal communication or behavior that is responsive to another’s needs and serves the function of comfort, encouragement, reassurance of caring, and/or the promotion of effective problem solving through information or tangible assistance” (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004, p. 495). In marital relationships, social support has been associated with relational benefits such as greater relationship satisfaction and stability as well as better individual mental and physical health. In families, social support has been associated with increases in children’s relationship and life satisfaction, resiliency, and better social adaptation and functioning (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004).

Although social support can be primarily perceived of as an attribute of a relationship that results from certain communication behaviors enacted in the relationship, social support can also be considered a communication skill of individuals, much like other personality attributes related to communication, such as verbal aggressiveness or communication apprehension (Burlison & Caplan, 1998). The socialization hypothesis holds that family communication is crucial in bringing these attributes about (Burlison, Delia, & Applegate, 1995; Burlison & Kunkel, 1996); that is, like many other relational

and interpersonal skills such as problem solving (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004) or privacy rules (Petronio, 2002), social support is experienced first and ultimately learned in families of origin through parent-child communication and parental modeling (Burleson & Kunkel, 1994).

Given the demonstrated relevance of social support as a social skill, the purpose of the two studies reported here was to investigate what type of family communication is most often associated with social support and to what extent children are socialized in their families of origin to engage in supportive close interpersonal relationships as adults. We begin by defining social support in terms of its functions. Then we discuss family communication patterns and how they relate to social support. Finally, we describe two studies we conducted in order to test a set of hypotheses relating family communication patterns with social support in families and in adult children's subsequent romantic relationships.

Study 1

Social Support

As Gardner and Cutrona's (2004) definition of social support suggests, social support is a broad concept that refers to interpersonal behaviors based on the positive functions such behaviors have for the recipient. Thus, social support is best defined in terms of receivers' perceptions independent of communicator intentions or easily observed "objective" characteristics. Cutrona and Russell (1987) identified six functions of social support: guidance, reliable alliance, attachment, reassurance of worth, social integration and opportunity for nurturance. Guidance refers to advice or information, often obtained from teachers, mentors, or parent-figures. Reliable alliance refers to the assurance that

others can be counted on for tangible assistance, such as money or shelter. Attachment refers to a sense of emotional closeness to others from which one derives a sense of security. Reassurance of worth refers to others' recognition of one's competence, skills and values. Social integration refers to a sense of belonging to a group that shares similar interests, concerns, and recreational activities. Finally, opportunity for nurturance refers to the sense that others rely upon one for their well being. This final aspect of social support differs from the other five aspects of social support in that it places the individual in the provider role as opposed to the receiver role. Cutrona and Russell (1987) included this function in their conceptualization of social support based on Weiss' (1974) argument that the ability to provide social support in a relationship is crucial for experiencing it.

Family Communication Patterns

Family communication is the primary means by which children learn to communicate with others, to interpret others' behaviors, to experience emotions, and to act in their relationships. Parents' communicative motives and preferences provide a model of behavior that shapes their children's communication skills and behaviors. A growing body of research examining family communication patterns has provided support for the notion that the communication environment within the family influences the communicative behaviors of the individual family members as well as perceptions of the family unit (Barbato, Graham, & Perse, 2003; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2004; Orrego & Rodriguez, 2001).

The two dimensions of family communication patterns, conversation orientation and conformity orientation, define characteristics of family interactions (Koerner &

Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2002b, 2004). Conversation orientation refers to the extent to which family members engage in frequent, spontaneous interactions with each other, unconstrained by topics discussed or time spent in discussion. All members of the family are encouraged to participate, and the family environment emphasizes open communication and the exploration of new ideas. Conformity orientation is characterized by a uniformity of beliefs and attitudes within the family. Interactions focus on maintaining harmonious relationships that reflect obedience to the parents, often manifest in the pressure to agree and to maintain the existing hierarchy (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997, 2002a, 2002b).

Although conversation orientation and conformity orientation are distinct concepts, these two dimensions are not entirely independent of one another. For example, researchers consistently have found small to moderate negative correlations between conformity orientation and conversation orientation (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997; 2002b). In addition, these two dimensions often interact with each other with respect to the effects they have on various outcomes. For example, in research on family communication patterns and conflict behaviors of adult children, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002c) found that conversation orientation in the family of origin amplified the effects conformity orientation had on conflict behaviors.

Combining the two dimensions results in four family types. *Consensual* families are high in both conformity and conversation orientation. Communication in consensual families reflects a tension between exploring ideas through open communicative exchanges and a pressure to agree in support of the existing family hierarchy (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997, 2002b). *Pluralistic* families are low in conformity orientation and high

in conversation orientation. Communication among family members is characterized as open and unrestrained, with a focus on producing independent ideas and fostering communication competence in the children of these families (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997, 2002b). *Protective* families are high in conformity orientation and low in conversation orientation. Communication in these families functions to maintain obedience and enforce family norms; little value is placed on the exchange of ideas or the development of communication skills (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997, 2002b). *Laissez-faire* families are low in both conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Family members do not often engage each other in conversation, and they place little value on communication or the maintenance of a family unit (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997, 2002b).

Conversation orientation and conformity orientation are rooted in theoretical work by McLeod and Chaffee (1972). These scholars presented a theory of family communication arguing that family communication patterns reflect the means by which a family perceives and shares social reality. They further argued that one way to create a shared reality is to discuss ideas or concepts to arrive at shared meaning, which they labeled concept-orientation. An alternative way is to turn to the parents for guidance, which McLeod and Chaffee labeled socio-orientation. In terms of family communication, concept-orientation is characterized by open expression of ideas and active engagement in debate, whereas socio-orientation is characterized by the effort to maintain a harmonious parent-child relationship.

McLeod and Chaffee's Family Communication Patterns instrument (FCP), primarily used in mass communication research, was revised to more accurately measure the

underlying dimensions of conformity and communication practices within families by Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990, Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994). Concept-orientation and socio-orientation were re-conceptualized as conversation orientation and conformity orientation, respectively, and the Revised Family Communication Patterns instrument (RFCP) proved more reliable and valid than the original FCP instrument (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990).

Family Communication and the Socialization of Social Support

Interpersonal communication skills that serve as resources aiding in the development of relationships, such as social support, are acquired within families. Parents foster the acquisition of such communication skills necessary to strategically accomplish relationship goals. They accomplish this explicitly through teaching appropriate behaviors and implicitly through modeling of their own communication behaviors. Children experience social support in their families and learn how to provide social support to others when the family communication is open, empathic, and reflective of the thoughts and feelings of others (Burlison et al., 1995). Burlison et al. labeled such communication “person-centered” and argued that it results in more complex cognitive representations of others. Complex representations of others, in turn, foster the use of social support in interactions with others. The proximate mechanism by which person-centeredness leads to complex cognitive representations, and ultimately to social support skills, is parents’ use of an elaborated code. Communication that uses an elaborated code can be characterized by a focus on feelings, motivations, and other internal states.

In contrast, family communication that focuses on rules and children’s compliance with rules is experienced as less socially supportive by children and children are less

likely to acquire social support skills. Burleson labeled such communication “position-centered” and argued that it results in children’s rote learning and application of social rules and in less complex mental representations of others. Position-centered communication is associated with a restricted code that focuses on stating rules, norms and social conventions, often without explaining the reasons for their existence.

Conversation orientation and conformity orientation are closely related to elaborated and restricted codes, respectively. Conversation orientation results from families discussing and exploring concepts; including those involving the psychology, feelings, and motivations of others. Thus, conversation orientation leads to an elaborated code in Burleson’s sense. Similarly, conformity orientation in families results from children focusing on their parents to learn appropriate attitudes and behaviors, including expectations for how one should behave in a given social situation. Thus, conformity orientation leads to a restricted code in Burleson’s sense.

Evidence that family communication patterns are related to person-centered communication and therefore to social support skills has been provided by Koerner and Cvancara (2002), who predicted that conformity orientation would manifest itself at the micro level in family conversations. Their research indicated that high conformity orientation is associated with verbal communication that is low in other orientation. In contrast, low conformity orientation is associated with other-orientation through the validation of others’ attitudes and beliefs, as well as the acceptance of what others say. Thus, low conformity orientation in family communication is associated with speech acts that affirm the feelings and opinions of the individual and encourage perspective taking.

In sum, the evidence suggests that family communication patterns and social support are related. These relationships are the basis for our first set of predictions.

H1: Conversation orientation will be positively correlated with perceived social support in the family of origin.

H2: Conformity orientation will be negatively correlated with perceived social support in the family of origin.

Assuming that social support is a learned behavior that children acquire in their families of origin, we would also hypothesize that family communication patterns and social support of adult children in their subsequent romantic relationships will be correlated. Specifically:

H3: Conversation orientation in family of origin will be positively correlated with perceived social support in adult children's romantic relationships.

H4: Conformity orientation in the family of origin will be negatively correlated with perceived social support in adult children's romantic relationships.

Method

Participants. Participants were 268 undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university who received extra credit for their participation. The sample was mostly female (72%) and Caucasian (87%, African-American = 3%, Asian = 7%, other = 4%). The mean age was 21.8 (SD = 3.38; range 18-56). Participants reported on romantic relationships (98% heterosexual) that on average had lasted 2.2 years (SD = 2.5; range 0-22 years).

Procedure. Researchers described the research project in a short presentation during class time to undergraduate students in communication studies courses, and

interested students received a flier with the Web address for the study. Interested students could log onto the website during a three week period of the 2003 spring semester. The questionnaire was presented on six different Web pages asking for demographic information, information regarding participants' current romantic relationships, and information regarding participants' family communication during the participants' childhood and adolescence.

Instruments. *Family Communication Pattern* were measured using Ritchie and Fitzpatrick's Revised Family Communication Patterns instrument (RFCP). The RFCP measures two dimensions of family communication: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Both the 11-item conformity orientation scale ($\alpha = .84$) and the 15-item conversation orientation scale ($\alpha = .92$) had acceptable reliabilities.

Perceived Social Support was measured in the family of origin and the current romantic relationship with relationship-specific versions (i.e., participants' relationships with parents & participants' romantic relationships) of Cutrona and Russell's (1987) social provisions scale (SPS). The SPS consists of 24 Likert-style items asking respondents to agree or disagree on five-point scales (1 = completely disagree; 5 = completely agree) with statements regarding six types of perceived social support. Four items measured each type of social support, and average scores for each type of social support were computed. We also computed averages for overall perceived support. Due to the conceptual difference between opportunity for nurturance, which is giving support to the partner, and the other five components of social support, which measure support received from the partner, the overall measure for social support was computed by averaging participants' responses to the 20 items measuring received social support rather

than the entire instrument. The SPS was adapted to the two relationships by re-phrasing the items to refer either to the current romantic partner or to the parents during the participants' childhood. Cronbach's reliability coefficients for the overall scales (romantic relationship: $\alpha = .91$; relationship with parent: $\alpha = .93$) as well as the sub-scales were acceptable (reliable alliance: $\alpha = .76$ & $.75$; attachment: $\alpha = .79$ & $.87$; guidance: $\alpha = .78$ & $.89$; opportunity for nurturance: $\alpha = .66$ & $.79$; social integration: $\alpha = .75$ & $.80$; and reassurance of worth: $\alpha = .73$ & $.86$).

Results

Family communication patterns and social support in family of origin. To test the hypotheses that family communication patterns are associated with perceived family social support, we conducted seven hierarchical linear regressions, with the total perceived family support and the six sub-scales of the measure as dependent variables and family conversation orientation, family conformity orientation, and their interaction as independent variables. For total perceived support, the regression equation accounted for 68% of the variance ($F [3, 263] = 185.81, p < .001$). Conversation orientation ($\beta = .73, p < .001$) was the best predictor of family social support, whereas conformity orientation was not significant ($\beta = -.03, ns$). The interaction between conversation orientation and conformity orientation, however, was significant ($\beta = .18, p < .001$). To ease interpretation of the interaction, the sample was divided into high and low conversation orientation and high and low conformity orientation using a median split, and group means were computed (see Figure 1). Results suggest that for participants from high conversation orientation families, level of conformity orientation was insignificant with regard to social support, which was uniformly high. For participants from low

conversation orientation families, however, increased conformity orientation was associated with a decrease in perceived social support. Results for the sub-scales essentially replicated the findings for the total score (see Table 1), with the exception of reassurance of worth. Here, in addition to the significant effects of conversation orientation and the interaction, conformity orientation had a significant negative association with perceived social support.

Thus, the data provided strong support for H1 that conversation orientation is positively associated with social support in families. Support for H2 that conformity orientation is negatively associated with social support was supported only for family social support of reassurance of worth.

To further investigate the influence of family communication patterns on different aspects of social support in families, we conducted a repeated measures MANOVA with social support types as the within-subjects variables and conversation orientation and conformity orientation as the between-subjects factors. To determine families high and low on conversation and conformity orientation, we conducted a median split on those two variables. Results showed statistically significant multivariate effects for type of social support ($\lambda = 39$, $F [5, 259] = 79.78$, $p < .001$), the interaction of social support with conversation orientation ($\lambda = 70$, $F [5, 259] = 21.96$, $p < .001$), and the interaction of social support type with conformity orientation ($\lambda = 94$, $F [5, 259] = 3.08$, $p < .01$). The three-way interaction was not statistically significant ($\lambda = 98$, $F [5, 259] = 0.96$, $p = .44$). Multivariate between-subjects effects were also statistically significant for conversation orientation ($\eta^2 = .26$, $F [1, 263] = 89.80$, $p < .001$), conformity orientation ($\eta^2 = .03$, $F [1, 263] = 8.02$, $p < .005$) and the interaction ($\eta^2 = .15$, $F [1, 263] = 3.36$, $p < .05$). To

investigate the nature of these effects and interactions, scores on the six social support types were computed for each family type and compared (see Figure 2).

Inspecting Figure 2 shows that for all six types of social support, the scores are highest for families high in conversation orientation (i.e., pluralistic and consensual families), lowest for families low on conversation orientation and high on conformity orientation (protective families), and somewhere in the middle for families low on both conversation orientation and conformity orientation (laissez-faire families). Also noteworthy is that members of all family types report high scores for reliable alliance, indicating that a feeling of belongingness is perceived in all family types. Similarly, the scores for opportunity for nurturance are uniformly low. This is clearly an indication of the family dynamic that makes children recipients of nurturance rather than providers. Finally, it is noteworthy that the greatest differentiation between pluralistic and consensual families on the one hand and protective and laissez-faire families on the other hand is in the dimensions of attachment, guidance, and social integration. Here laissez-faire families are only marginally better than protective families, whereas for reassurance of worth, they score almost as high as consensual families.

Family communication patterns and social support in romantic relationships. To test the hypotheses that family communication patterns are associated with social support in adult children's subsequent romantic relationships, we conducted seven hierarchical linear regressions with the total perceived support in romantic relationships and the six sub-scales of the measure as dependent variables and family conversation orientation, family conformity orientation, and their interaction as independent variables. Only the equation with the reliable alliance sub-scale as the dependent variable reached statistical

significance ($R = .18$, $F [2,262] = 3.77$, $p = .02$). Both conversation orientation ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .03$) and conformity orientation ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .01$) were negatively correlated with reliable alliance. Thus, the data did not support the predictions that family conversation orientation is positively associated and family conformity orientation is negatively associated with social support in romantic relationships.

Discussion

Social support in family of origin. Results of Study 1 were consistent with the prediction that family communication patterns are associated with perceived family social support. As expected, conversation orientation was positively associated with all aspects of social support in families. Families that value open communication and the free exchange of ideas are perceived as more supportive than families that do not value open communication as much. The predicted negative association of conformity orientation on family social support was supported as a direct effect only for reassurance of worth. Statistically significant interactions, however, revealed that conformity orientation had the predicted negative effect when conversation orientation was low. Thus, results clearly showed that family communication patterns affect how supportive family communication is.

Social support in romantic relationships. Even though the effects of family communication patterns were clear and strong for how supportive family communication is, we did not find convincing evidence that family communication patterns affect adult children's subsequent romantic relationships as suggested by the socialization hypothesis. Only the reliable alliance sub-scale correlated with family communication, explaining a scant 3% of the variance. The failure to find the expected associations may indicate that

family communication might not be as influential on adult children's romantic relationships as suggested. An alternative explanation, however, is that we did not measure social support correctly. Cutrona and Russell's measure is comprehensive, but with the exception of the opportunity for nurturance sub-scale, it measures received social support rather than provided social support. In other words, if the socialization hypothesis is true, family communication should correlate with the social support adult children provide in their subsequent romantic relationships rather than with the social support they perceive in it. Thus, it is the adult child's romantic partner's perceptions of social support that should correlate with family communication rather than the adult child's own perceptions. In addition, rather than having a direct effect on partners' perceptions, the effects of family communication patterns on social support in adult children's romantic relationships should be mediated by children's perception of social support in their families of origin. To investigate this possibility was the purpose of Study 2.

Study 2

Family Communication Patterns and Social Support in Family of Origin

The hypotheses tested in Study 2 mirrored those of Study 1 as far as the associations between family communication patterns and family social support are concerned. That is, H1 predicted a positive correlation between conversation orientation and perceived social support. H2 predicted a negative correlation between conformity orientation and perceived social support, and H3 predicted a statistically significant effect of the interaction between conversation orientation and conformity orientation on perceived social support.

Family Communication Patterns and Social Support in Romantic Relationships

With regard to the associations between family communication patterns and social support in adult children's romantic relationships, the predictions in Study 2 are complex. Specifically, we predict that rather than having direct effects, family communication patterns' effects on social support in the romantic relationships of adult children will be mediated by the children's perceptions of their own families' social support. In addition, rather than having an effect only on their own perceptions of social support in their romantic relationships, we also predict that family communication patterns will affect their partners' perception of social support. Finally, given that social support should affect relationship satisfaction, we also predict that perceived social support in romantic relationships will be associated with relationship satisfaction. The causal model emerging from these predictions is presented in Figure 3. A formal statement of the hypotheses follows here:

H4: Perceived social support in families of origin will be positively correlated with adult children's perceived social support in their romantic relationship.

H5: Perceived social support in families of origin will be positively correlated with adult children's partners' perceived social support in their romantic relationship.

H6: Perceived social support in adult children's romantic relationships will be associated with their relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants. Participants were 244 undergraduate students of several communication studies courses of a large Midwestern university who received extra credit for their participation. The sample was 57% female and 43% male. The sample was mostly

Caucasian (85%, African-American = 3%, Asian = 7%, other = 5%). The mean age was 21.15 (SD = 2.47; range 17-34). Participants reported on romantic relationships (98% heterosexual) that on average had lasted 2.2 years (SD = 2.07; range 0-14 years). Participants who indicated that they were in a romantic relationship with a partner who was able to complete the questionnaire comprised a sub-sample of 54 couples. The students were offered the opportunity to take part in the research project along with their romantic partner, whom they recruited outside of class once they decided to participate. Student participants received extra credit, and the non-student partners received a \$5 compensation for their participation. Participants were assigned identification numbers to enter upon commencement of the questionnaire; participants and their romantic partners used identical numbers to allow the researchers to match the partners to one another anonymously.

The sub-sample of couples was very similar to the larger sample; they were mostly Caucasian (females = 91%, males = 80%; African-American females = 4%, males = 4%; Asian females = 5%, males = 11%; other = 5%). The mean age was 20.9 for the females and 22.04 for the males (SD = 2.5 & 3.3; range 17-30 & 18-34). Participants' romantic relationships on average had lasted 2.2 years (SD = 2.1; range 0-11 years). The data from the larger sample was used to replicate the findings from Study 1, while the sub-sample of couples was used to test our predictions regarding romantic partners' contributions to social support.

Procedure. The two researchers described the research project in a short presentation during class time to undergraduate students in communication studies courses and interested students received a flier with the Web address for the study. Interested students

could log onto the web site during a three week period of the 2003 fall semester. The questionnaire was presented on six different Web pages asking for demographic information, information regarding participants' current romantic relationships, and information regarding participants' family communication during participants' childhood and adolescence. Individual measurements are discussed in the following section.

Instruments. *Family Communication Patterns* were measured using Ritchie and Fitzpatrick's Revised Family Communication Patterns instrument (RFCP). Both the 11-item conformity orientation scale ($\alpha = .82$) and the 15-item conversation orientation scale ($\alpha = .92$) were reliable.

Perceived Social Support was measured in the family of origin and in the current romantic relationship with relationship-specific versions of Cutrona and Russell's (1987) social provisions scale (SPS). To avoid potential ceiling effects suggested by some results of Study 1, we used a seven-point scale rather than the five-point scale used in Study 1 (1=disagree completely; 7 = agree completely). Cronbach's reliability coefficients for the overall scales (family social support: $\alpha = .92$; partner social support: $\alpha = .92$) as well as the sub-scales were acceptable (reliable alliance: $\alpha = .74$ & $.75$; attachment: $\alpha = .86$ & $.84$; guidance: $\alpha = .89$ & $.81$; opportunity for nurturance: $\alpha = .76$ & $.80$; social integration: $\alpha = .79$ & $.79$; and reassurance of worth: $\alpha = .86$ & $.82$).

Relationship Satisfaction was measured using a version of the marital opinion questionnaire (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). The measure consists of ten semantic differential items (e.g. miserable-enjoyable) as well as one global indicator ranging from "completely satisfied" to "completely dissatisfied". Following Huston et al., scores were computed averaging the ten semantic-differential items and then averaging that mean

with the single global item. Cronbach's alpha was used to test reliabilities (for the first ten items $\alpha = .93$, for the overall scale $\alpha = .94$), and the scale was positively correlated with the global item ($r = .84$).

Results

Family communication patterns and social support in family of origin. To replicate the results from the first study, we conducted seven hierarchical linear regressions with the total perceived family support and the six sub-scales of the measure as dependent variables and family conversation orientation, family conformity orientation, and their interaction as independent variables. Results were very similar to those of Study 1. For total perceived support, the regression equation accounted for 67% of the variance ($F [3, 240] = 183.80, p < .001$). Conversation orientation ($\beta = .74, p < .001$) was a better predictor of family social support than conformity orientation ($\beta = -.09, p < .05$). The interaction between conversation orientation and conformity orientation also was significant ($\beta = .11, p < .01$), suggesting that for participants from high conversation orientation families, level of conformity orientation was insignificant with regard to social support, which was uniformly high. For participants from low conversation orientation families, however, increased conformity orientation was associated with a decrease in perceived social support. Result of the sub-scales essentially replicated the findings for the total scores (see Table 2), although for most of the sub-scales, conformity orientation failed to reach statistical significance. A notable exception once again was reassurance of worth, where conformity orientation had a beta almost as large as conversation orientation ($-.30$ vs. $.40$). Thus, overall the results provided strong support for hypotheses 1-3.

Family communication patterns and social support in romantic relationships. To test hypotheses 4-6, which predicted correlations between family social support, social support in romantic relationships, and relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships, we tested the causal model presented in Figure 3 using structural equation modeling. Because testing this model required the use of the couple rather than the individual as the unit of analysis, data were drawn only from the sub-sample where both partners completed the questionnaire. Whenever possible, we compared the results obtained from the sub-sample to that of the larger sample and found without exception that results were almost identical, indicating that the sub-sample was representative of the larger sample. Although we did not predict sex differences and could have chosen to arbitrarily divide romantic couples into two separate groups for analysis, separating them by sex seemed appropriate, especially because past research has established some gender differences in social support and relationship satisfaction.

The first interesting outcome of the structural equation analysis was that when separated into gender groups, the interaction between conversation orientation and conformity orientation no longer predicted family social support. In addition, the structural equation model including the interactions did not fit the data better than the model without the interaction terms. Consequently, to make the model more readable and easier to interpret, the interaction terms were deleted from the final model tested (Figure 3). Overall, the model fit the data well. Of the twelve hypothesized correlations, nine were statistically significant, providing strong support for the theoretical model linking family communication patterns to social support in families and adult children's subsequent romantic relationships.

As predicted, family communication patterns were associated with family social support, although there were some interesting gender differences. For men, as originally predicted for the entire population, conversation orientation ($\beta = .55, p < .01$) was positively correlated and conformity orientation ($\beta = -.33, p < .01$) was negatively correlated with perceived social support in families. For women, however, there was only one significant main effect for conversation orientation ($\beta = .88, p < .001$), whereas conformity orientation had no correlation with social support ($\beta = .01, ns$). The analysis also showed some significant gender differences between family social support and social support in romantic relationships. For both men ($\beta = .50, p < .01$) and women ($\beta = .24, p < .05$), their own families' social support was associated with the social support they reported receiving in their own subsequent romantic relationships. As far as the social support of their partners' family is concerned, however, only the link between male partners' family social support and females' perceived social support was statistically significant ($\beta = .41, p < .01$). The link between females' family social support and male partners' perceived social support in their subsequent romantic relationship, however, was not ($\beta = .03, ns$). A similar pattern emerged for the association between perceived social support in romantic relationships and relationship satisfaction. For both men ($\beta = .64, p < .001$) and women ($\beta = .69, p < .001$), there was a large direct effect for perceived social support and their own relationship satisfaction. Still, only men's relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .26, p < .05$), not women's ($\beta = -.20, ns$) was influenced by the social support their partners perceive in their relationships.

It is important to note that these interesting gender differences were observed only for associations among variables. As far as variable means, there were no differences

between men and women regarding how they perceived their families and their romantic relationships, showed by repeated measurement MANOVAs for gender ($F [1, 52] = 3.68, ns$) and the gender-by-variables interaction ($F [4, 49] = 0.81, ns$).

Discussion

Social support in family of origin. This study investigated a sophisticated causal model linking family communication patterns to adult children's perceived social support in subsequent romantic relationships and their satisfaction in those relationships. Results using the large sample essentially replicated the results of Study 1, finding a positive correlation between family conversation orientation and family social support and a negative correlation between family conformity orientation and family social support. The interaction between conversation orientation and conformity orientation was also observed in the large sample, although the more detailed investigation of the couple data showed that this interaction was probably an effect due to gender. Specifically, it appears that while conversation orientation is associated with greater perceived social support in families for both genders, the negative association of conformity orientation and perceived social support exists for males only. Apparently, boys find conforming to their parents more distressing than do women, a tendency already observed by Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1994).

Social support in romantic relationships. With regard to the general hypotheses that children learn social support skills in their families of origin and apply these skills in their subsequent romantic relationships, these also were supported by the data, but more so for men than for women. While it is true for both genders that growing up in supportive families is associated with having more supportive romantic relationships as adults, it

seems that only women benefit from having their partners grow up in supportive families; for men the familial background of their partners makes no difference. The most likely explanation for this surprising finding seems to be that for men, the family is the only place where they learn supportive communication skills. Women, on the other hand, learn to be supportive even if their own families are not, suggesting that they are able to acquire these skills outside the family. This interpretation is supported by data showing that overall there are no differences between men and women in how supportive they perceive their families and romantic relationships to be. Thus, it is not the case that men generally perceive their families to be less supportive or that women perceive their partners to be less supportive. The only difference we observed was related to the distinction that if men come from less supportive families, they are perceived as less supportive by their partners, whereas how supportive men perceived their female partners is independent of the female partners' family background.

That perceived social supportiveness of the partner is strongly positively correlated with relationship satisfaction is not very surprising and is consistent with the existing research on social support in intimate relationships. It is surprising, however, that females' perceptions of their male partners' supportiveness is correlated with their male partners' relationship satisfaction, but not vice versa. In other words, men's relationship satisfaction is a function of how supportive they are perceived to be by their partners, whereas women's relationship satisfaction is not affected by how supportive they are perceived to be by their male partners. There is no single explanation of this interesting finding that we find completely persuasive. One possibility is that women, who based on traditional gender stereotypes, might expect their partners to be less supportive than men

expect their female partners to be, comment more on the social support that they receive from their partners, thereby increasing their partners' satisfaction. Conversely, men expecting a supportive partner comment less on the supportiveness they receive, leaving women without that positive feedback and without an increase in satisfaction. Another alternative explanation is that men are simply more sensitive than women in their response to how supportive their partners perceive them to be.

General Discussion

This research has demonstrated the importance of family communication patterns for children's experience of social support in families and their acquisition of this important interpersonal communication skill. Results of both studies show that conversation orientation in families is strongly associated with perceived family social support for children. As suggested by Koerner and Cavanaugh (2002), conversation orientation leads to more person-centeredness in parent-child communication and thus to greater social support in families. The effects of conformity orientation are somewhat less unequivocal. Although we observed a number of negative correlations between conformity orientation and social support, these correlations were never entirely consistent and appeared to be limited to children of families low in conversation-oriented families in Study 1 and exclusive to boys in Study 2. Still, even if the results for conformity orientation are not as consistent as those for conversation orientation, it is clear that when conformity orientation has an effect, it is always a negative correlation with social support, especially for families also low in conversation orientation (i.e., protective families). In fact, children of protective families reported the lowest scores on all six measures of social support and had particularly low scores on attachment, guidance, social integration, and

reassurance of worth. This is in stark contrast to families high in both conformity orientation and conversation orientation (i.e., consensual). Children of consensual families scored as high as children of pluralistic families (high conversation, low conformity) on all six measures of social support, save for reassurance of worth, where they were a little lower than children of pluralistic families. This demonstrates that while conformity orientation has minor effects with regard to social support for families where conversation orientation is high, it makes a significant difference for children of families whose conversation orientation is low.

An interesting finding that emerged from the couples data in Study 2 was that conformity orientation has a negative effect on perceived social support for boys but not for girls. This is not a consequence of different perspectives on how conformity-oriented families are, as both male and female respondents described their families as equally conformity-oriented. Still, it appears that for boys, conformity orientation in their families leads them to perceive their families as less supportive, whereas girls' perceptions of family social support are not at all affected by their families' conformity orientation. This is consistent with a society in which independence from parents is more important for boys than for girls, and consequently boys, but not girls react negatively to parental pressures to conform.

The finding that perceived family social support has direct effects on how supportive romantic relationships are perceived is consistent with a dyadic definition of social support. In a dyadic definition, social support refers to two interrelated interpersonal skills: (1) the ability to provide social support to others and (2) the ability to recognize and utilize the social support others provide. The ability to provide social support

includes perspective taking, empathizing with the distressed persons' situation, and providing symbolic and instrumental support. The ability to utilize social support includes acceptance of what others say and the assistance they offer. Thus, the ability and motivation to provide social support in a relationship is a necessary but insufficient condition to guarantee its benefits; recipients must also possess the ability and the desire to utilize social support by others if the need arises (Coble, Gantt, & Mallinckrodt, 1996). Our results suggest that experiencing social support in families allows adult children to experience it in their subsequent adult relationships as well.

Another very interesting finding also stemming from the couples data was that based on their partners' perceptions of social support, it appears that only men's ability to provide social support is affected by how supportive their families are. Based on the socialization hypothesis, one would have expected both partners' perceptions of how supportive their partner is to be a function of that partner's family social support. Instead, only women's perceptions of their male partner's supportiveness were correlated to the male partner's family social support. Men's perceptions of their female partners' supportiveness did not correlate with females' reports of their families' supportiveness.

Again, this finding cannot be explained by gender differences in how supportive partners are. Participants of both genders perceived their partners to be equally supportive. To us, this suggests that at least with regard to social support, the family is a more crucial socialization agent for boys than for girls. Women seem to be able to acquire social support skills independently from how supportive their own families are, potentially from their female friends or from a culture that often defines being female in terms of being supportive. In contrast, men are more dependent upon their families of

origin for these important interpersonal skills. If they do not acquire them in their families, in a culture that does not value social support in males; they do not acquire them at all before entering into romantic relationships as adults. Given that our sample consisted of predominantly young couples, our data does not address the issue of whether men are able to learn to be more socially supportive in their romantic relationships. Future research will have to address this important question.

Of course, an important caveat is that our findings are based on reports of adult children recalling past family interactions, which allows for the possibility that judgments about family communication patterns and social support reflect present family relationships rather than past family relationships or are based on faulty memories. Ultimately, only longitudinal studies observing families for many years will be able to avoid such methodological shortcomings, and it is our goal to conduct such research in the future. Until that time, however, our results provide initial evidence linking family communication patterns to social support in families and in adult children's subsequent romantic relationships. In this context, it is worth reporting repeatedly and to larger audiences that open and positive communication among family members as it occurs in high conversation orientation families can be an end in itself. In other words, time spent communicating with family members is valuable precisely because it has positive consequences for family members, even if it is not ostensibly achieving any particular goals and the payoff is far in the future, or even in another relationship altogether.

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Table 1

Summary of Hierarchical Linear Regression Analysis for Family Communication Pattern

Variables Predicting Perceived Social Support (N = 268)

Variable	CV	CF	IX	R ²	F	p<
Reassurance of worth	.47***	-.16**	.20***	.47	77.02	.001
Reliable alliance	.45***	.00	.24***	.33	43.05	.001
Attachment	.77***	.04	.12**	.63	150.38	.001
Guidance	.77***	.02	.08	.63	147.62	.001
Nurturance	.29***	.10	-.08	.06	5.23	.002
Social integration	.64***	-.02	.17***	.53	99.66	.001
Combined	.73***	-.03	.18***	.68	187.36	.001

Note: CV = conversation orientation, CF = conformity orientation, IX = CV x CF interaction;

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; $df = 3/263$. Combined is the total of all scales minus nurturance.

Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Linear Regression Analysis for Family Communication Pattern

Variables Predicting Perceived Social Support (N = 244)

Variables	CV	CF	IX	R ²	F	p<
Reassurance of worth	.44***	-.30***	.23***	.53	132.93	.001
Reliable alliance	.44***	-.10	.15**	.30	50.33	.001
Attachment	.77***	.03	.05	.58	167.36	.001
Guidance	.77***	.03	.07	.65	224.25	.001
Nurturance	.33***	.20**	-.12	.05	6.83	.001
Social integration	.65***	-.03	.00	.44	96.30	.001
Combined	.74***	-.09*	.11**	.67	183.80	.001

Note: CV = conversation orientation, CF = conformity orientation, IX = CV x CF interaction;

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; $df = 3/240$. Combined is the total of all scales minus nurturance.

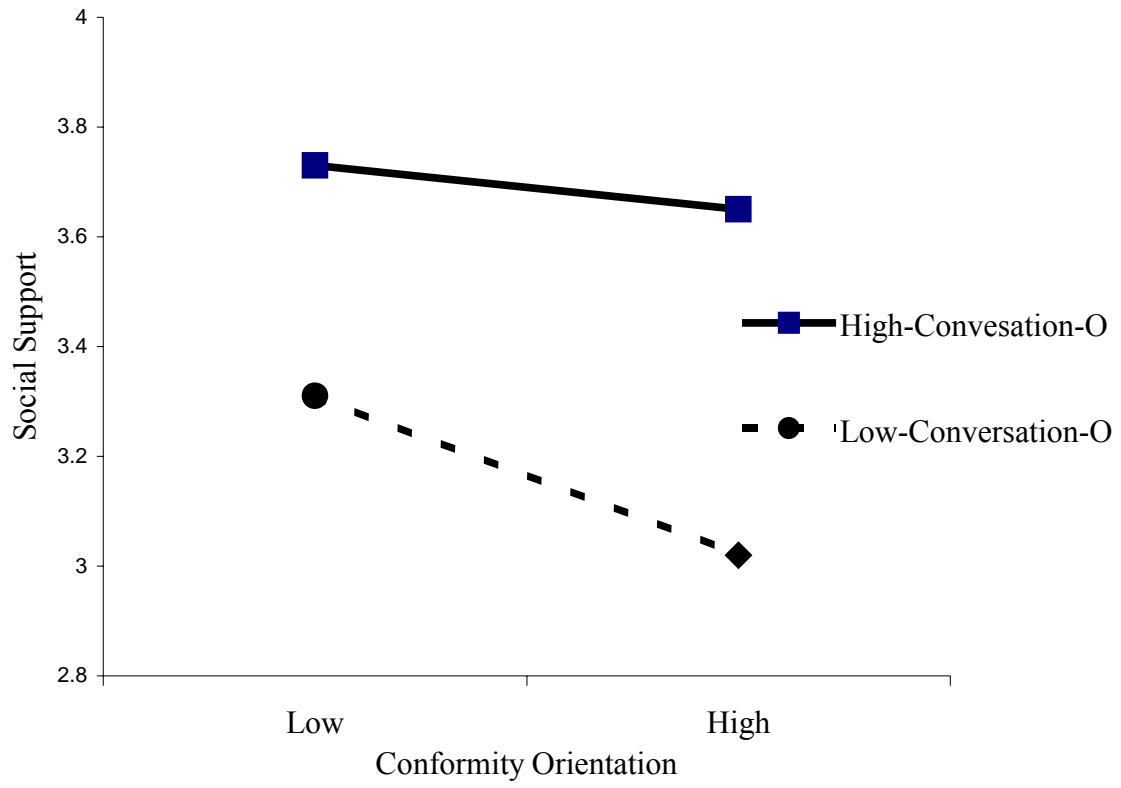


Figure 1. The interaction of conversation orientation and conformity orientation as predictors of combined perceived social support in the family of origin.

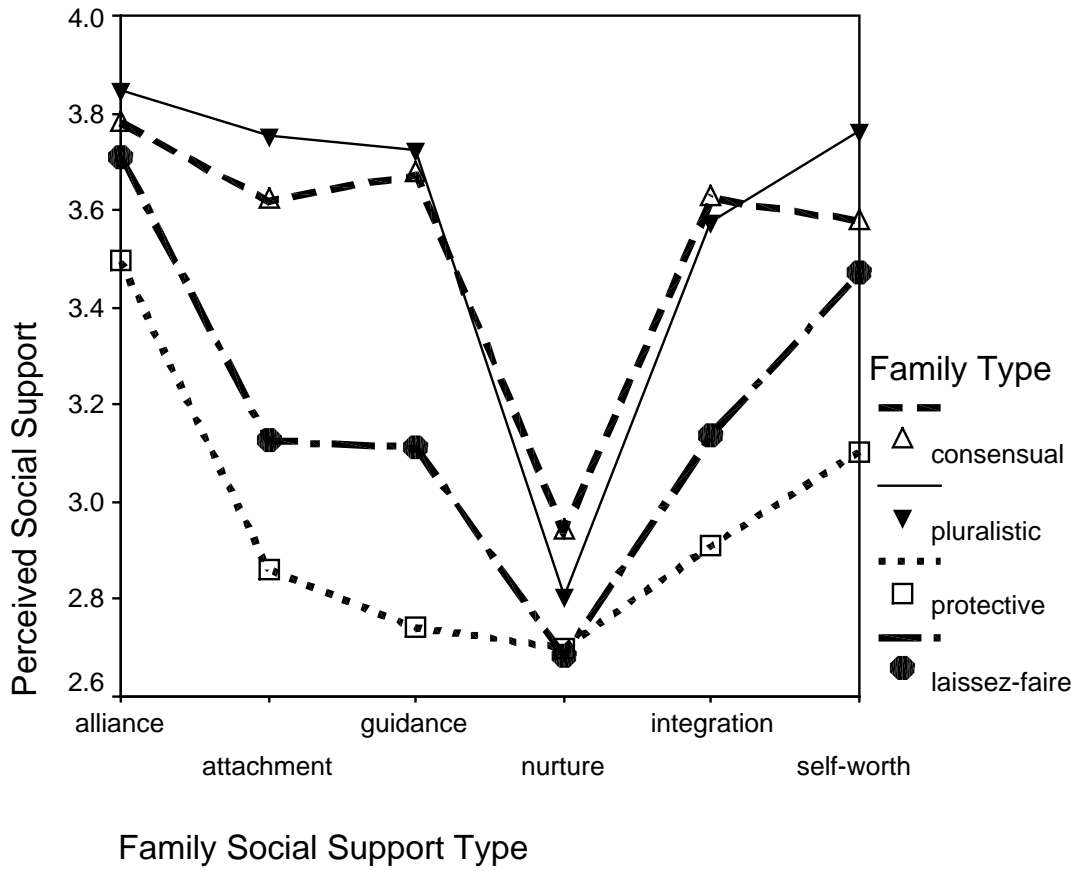


Figure 2. Perceived Social Support in Families of Origin by Family Type.

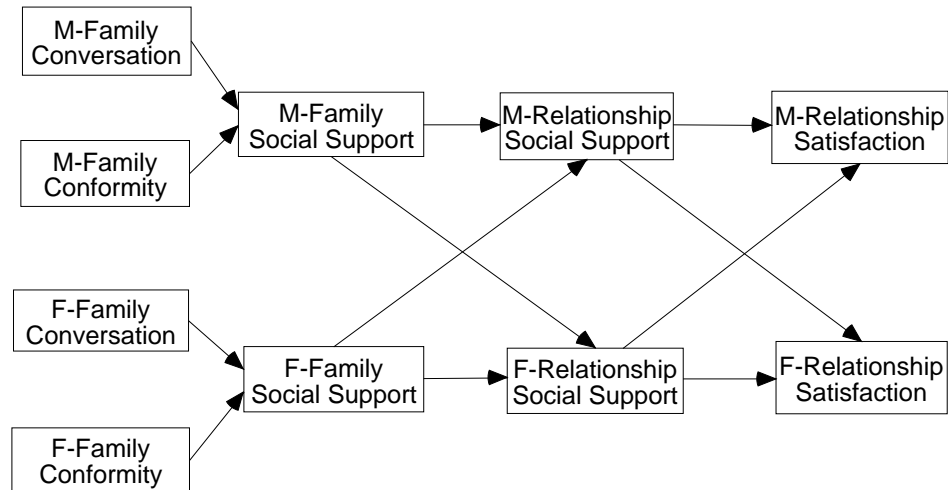


Figure 3. Initial causal model testing hypotheses 4-6 in Study 2. The romantic couple serves as the unit of analysis.

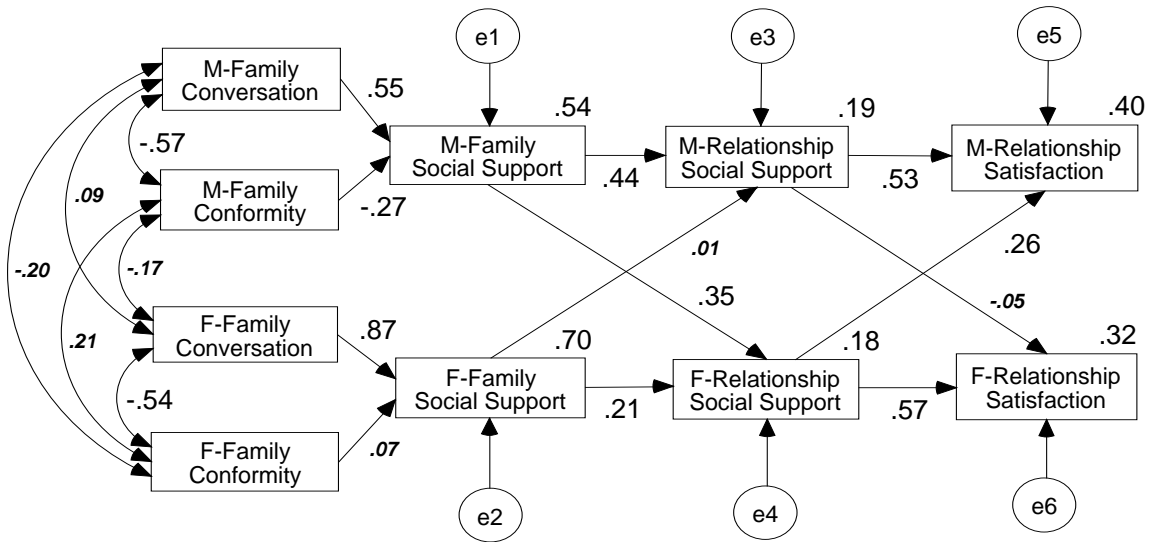


Figure 4: Results of path-analytic model. $\chi^2 = 35.04$; $df = 27$; $p = .14$; $CFI = .996$; $N = 53$; “good model fit”.

Note: Statistically non-significant coefficients are italicized in reduced font.

Conformity orientation, especially if it is partnered with low conversation orientation, likely inhibits the development of elaborate communication skills. This is evident from the research findings that parents high in conformity tend to utilize communication for personal influence motives (Barbato et al., 2003), and in particular if they are relying on commands and invocation of authority to gain compliance. These communication strategies preclude a child's opportunity to practice reasoning and perspective taking in their relationship with their parents, which leaves them at a disadvantage when it comes time to communicate in other relationships.

Cutrona and Russell (1987) take as their theoretical framework, the six social functions described by Weiss (1974) in his research on loneliness. Weiss stated that individuals must experience all six provisions to gain maximum benefit, which is to avoid loneliness. Categorically, the provisions are divided into assistance-related and non-assistance-related areas, each of which is obtained from a specific kind of relationship. Satisfying five of the provisions can be accomplished through friendships and family relationships, even if the family relationships are surrogate (i.e. parent-figures, and mentors). One provision, opportunity for nurturance, cannot be entirely met solely by family or friends, as it depends on having someone who depends upon another to secure a sense of well-being. Opportunity for nurturance is the one provision that is given by an individual rather than received, and according to Weiss (1974) nurturing one's offspring or one's spouse are the most frequent sources for this provision of social support. Cutrona and Russell (1987) do not view opportunity for nurturance as a type of social support in the strict sense; they retained the provision based on the idea that giving as well as receiving social support has benefits to the individual.

Cutrona (1996), in her research on social support, argues that relationship satisfaction and marital quality can benefit by the supportive communication that partners engage in. Two of the mechanisms which she describes as having an influence on the quality and survival of relationships include the role that support-like behaviors play in moderating the intensity of conflicts, preventing inevitable disagreements from escalating to the point of becoming destructive. Supportive communications between partners also benefits relationships by strengthening the emotional bond that exists in couples through moments of shared emotional intimacy. Together, these mechanisms allow partners to assign more benign attributions to hurtful or inconsiderate behaviors that might otherwise lead to significant conflict over relatively minor errors in judgment.

In this study, we examine the effect of family communication patterns on perceptions of social support as reported by both partners. We are interested in observing the effects of perceived social support in the family of origin on perceived social support in the romantic relationship, the effects of social support in the romantic relationship on the partner's perceptions of social support in the relationship, and the effects of social support on romantic partner's relationship satisfaction. Therefore, our final hypotheses:

Ha: Perceptions of social support in the romantic relationship will be positively correlated with reported relationship satisfaction of the individual.

Hb: Perceptions of social support in the romantic relationship will be positively correlated with reported relationship satisfaction of the partner.