Who Supports Whom? How Age and Gender Affect the Perceived Quality of Support from Family and Friends

Susan A. Lynch, PhD
This study investigates age and gender differences in the relative perception of social support across adulthood. Findings indicate that age and gender do affect both the perception of positive support and the perception of demandingness across different support relationships. In all age groups, men appear to perceive spousal support as the most positive, while women seem to perceive the support received from children as being the most positive. However, it is apparent that all three relationships studied – those with spouse, children, and friends/other relatives – are important sources of support for both men and women.

Key Words: Social support, Gender, Age

Who Supports Whom? How Age and Gender Affect the Perceived Quality of Support from Family and Friends

Susan A. Lynch, PhD

Over the past two decades there has been increasing interest in the role social support plays in helping people cope with life stress. Numerous studies have found that individuals who have a spouse, friends, or family members who give them psychological and/or material support are healthier than those without such relationships (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Indeed, the support supplied through social attachments with family and friends has been shown not only to directly affect psychological adjustment (Sarason, Levin, Basham, & Sarason, 1983; Streeter & Franklin, 1992), but also to provide a buffer that helps moderate the detrimental effects of life stress on health and well-being (Seeman & Berkman, 1988; Smith, Fernengel, Holcroft, Gerald, & Marien, 1994).

Nevertheless, research assessing the role of social support in moderating the negative effects of life stress indicates that the effectiveness of such support depends on many factors. These include the type and amount of support provided, as well as the context surrounding the support transaction and the recipient's satisfaction with the support (Antonucci, 1985; Krause, 1987; Powell, 1990; Smith et al., 1994; Vaux, 1985; Ward, 1985). The conceptualizing and operationalizing of social support, often criticized as inadequate (Thoits, 1982), has undergone a series of redefinitions and modifications in recent years. It has become increasingly evident that characteristics of support quality are as important, if not more so, as those relating to support quantity (Smith et al., 1994; Ward, 1985). Social support is now generally conceived to be a complex construct with at least three distinct dimensions: i) structure (e.g., type of relationship, size, etc.); ii) function (e.g., the type of support actually exchanged such as affective or instrumental support); and iii) perceived quality (e.g., the recipient's subjective assessment of support exchanges and relationships, distinct from simple existence) (Antonucci, 1994; Cohen, 1992; Gottlieb, 1988; Powell, 1990; Streeter & Franklin, 1992; Thoits, 1982).

It is clear that variability in these dimensions affects not only the amount of support available, but also the effectiveness of support given and received (Krause, 1987; Powell, 1990; Vaux, 1985; Ward, 1985). What is not clear, however, is how other factors, such as personal characteristics of both the support provider and recipient, are related to variability in these social support dimensions. Despite this lack of clarity, there is growing evidence that two such characteristics – age and gender – affect support relationships in important ways (Antonucci, 1990, 1994; Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987a, 1987b; Barnett, Biener, & Baruch, 1987; Cohler & Lieberman, 1980; Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble, & Zellman, 1978; Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Levitt, Weber, & Guacci, 1993; Schultz, 1991; Silverman, 1987).

Specifying how gender and age differentially affect variations in social support is especially important in light of the fact that the correlation between mental and physical health and social support variables has often been weaker than predicted (Antonucci, 1985). Indeed, research has consistently failed to find a correlation between interaction with family and positive mental health outcomes in elderly samples (Ishii-Kuntz, 1990). Even more alarming is the fact that, for females, there appears to be a negative correlation between support network size and satisfaction with support (Cohler & Lieberman, 1980; Kessler & McLeod, 1984).

This article investigates how gender is related to two dimensions of social support – type of relationship and...
perceived quality – and how these relations change across age groups. The analyses focus on the direct and interaction effects of age level and gender on the relative perceived quality of relationships with spouse, children, and friends/other relatives across six life stages.

Literature Review

Vaux (1985) states that research has consistently found significant gender differences in friend and family relationships, and numerous other authors have noted gender differences in the dimensions of support quality and structure (Antonucci, 1990, 1994; Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987b; Barnett et al., 1987; Cohler & Lieberman, 1980; Frieze et al., 1978; Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Schultz, 1991; Silverman, 1987). For example, adult women frequently report receiving more support from friends and family members than do men. Additionally, while women report having close, intimate relationships with a few friends and family members, men are more likely to report having casual relationships with many people (see Schultz, 1991, and Vaux, 1985, for a comprehensive review).

Overall, findings indicate that the social and family relationships of women, when compared to those of men, tend to exhibit more closeness and intimacy, and that women place a higher value on support reciprocity. These findings have led some theorists to describe the support relationships of women as “qualitatively superior” to those of men (Antonucci, 1994). However, there is growing evidence that, in some cases, rather than buffering the negative effects of life stress, women’s larger, more intimate support networks actually increase their vulnerability to the detrimental effects of such stress (Antonucci, 1994; Kessler & McLeod, 1984, Schultz, 1991). For example, women’s high level of involvement in the lives of significant others, coupled with their role as the main providers of support to spouses, children, aging parents, and both women and men friends, may lead them to experience increased levels of distress when network needs for support become too emotionally and/or physically demanding (Starker, 1986).

In contrast, men may be more likely to experience a lack of adequate support, especially after a divorce or the death of a spouse. Indeed, one of the most striking gender differences in the utilization of support is the fact that men focus heavily on one provider of support – their wives – whereas women most often turn to women friends (Belle, 1987; Schultz, 1991). Additionally, Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton (1985) note that women in middle and old age are more likely to have close relationships outside the marital relationship than are men in these age groups. This finding is supported by Antonucci (1994), who states that gender differences in support network size are the result of the fact that older women define significantly more people as being “so close, it is hard to imagine life without them.”

Social exchange theorists point out that all relationships incur certain costs to the participants if they are to be maintained, and hold that both or all participants in a social relationship not only receive benefits, but also are subject to having demands made upon their physical and emotional resources (Rook, 1992). Although social support relationships, by definition, were conceived as only positive and beneficial in early literature, it has recently become evident that these relationships can possess both positive and negative features (Rook, 1992). Therefore, in examining the perception of quality of support from various relationships across the life span, this research considers how support interactions can be beneficial and/or stressful for both participants.

Despite the numerous studies on gender differences, there have been few studies to date that have examined social support from a life span perspective (Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Levitt et al., 1993). Most studies that have explored age differences in support have tended to focus on cross-generational transactions, paying little attention to normative changes that may occur in social support at different developmental stages. There is evidence, however, that such changes do occur, and that variations in the structure and perceived quality of social support is related to these changes (Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Levitt et al., 1993).

For example, Cowan and Cowan (1992) note that young adults often become socially isolated when they marry and start families. Indeed, the birth of the first child often results in a significant decrease in social interactions with nonparent friends and coworkers. Other studies have noted that middle-aged adults may experience increased stress when they are called upon to provide largely unreciprocated support to both their children and their aging parents (Ingersoll-Dayton & Antonucci, 1988; Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Troll, 1987).

In addition to the variations in social support related directly to gender and age, it is important to recognize that the interaction of these variables also affects the structure, function, and perceived quality of social support. For example, although it appears women are more distressed by unreciprocal relationships than are men (Antonucci, 1994), it appears that a desire for reciprocity in support relationships adds to women’s levels of stress for different reasons at different points in the life span. Young adulthood is a time when women often begin careers, marry, and start having children. Although work relationships, other friendships, and partner relationships may provide adequate support for women before they become parents, these supportive relationships can be disrupted by the birth of the first child (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). This can result in a significant increase in stress, especially if the woman perceives her husband as nonsupportive. Thus, a young, new mother may find her emotional and physical energy taxed by the demands of a new infant, who cannot reciprocate, at the same time she is receiving less support from others in her network due to a decrease in contact.

In middle adulthood, however, unreciprocal relationships may be stressful for a different reason. During this period, many close relationships are not reciprocal in nature. Middle-aged women tend to be
the primary caretaker for their spouse, children, and aging parents (Ingersoll-Dayton & Antonucci, 1988; Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Troll, 1987). Therefore, it is likely that these women will find themselves in a position of receiving less support than they provide to a large number of network members. Additionally, it may be that the larger and closer the network, the more likely it is that these women will be faced with providing support to network members for whom they feel responsible and from whom they cannot expect immediate reciprocation.

For these reasons, it is likely that above and beyond the direct effects gender and age have on variation in social support, there is also a significant effect for the interaction of these variables. Although several studies have explored this interaction, few, if any, have done so from a life span perspective. This is important because it is likely that men and women will perceive the quality and the demandingness of their support relationships differently at different age levels.

These analyses not only examine the direct and interaction effects of both age and gender on the perceived quality of social support, but build on previous research in two ways. First, these data present a unique opportunity to assess the perceptions of the positive support received from and the demands made by one’s spouse, children, and friends/other relatives in relation to each other. This allows for a comparison of how positive and/or stressful these relationships are perceived to be. Additionally, by looking at these perceptions across five age groups, we can begin to identify normative changes that may occur in men’s and women’s perceptions of their support networks over the life span.

Study Question and Hypotheses

The question addressed here is whether age group, gender, and/or their interaction affect the relative perceived quality of support received from three types of relationships across the life span. The three types of relationships examined are those with one’s spouse, one’s children, and one’s friends/other relatives.

Hypothesis I

Given previous research findings that indicate there are gender differences in all three dimensions of social support — structure, function, and perceived quality (Antonucci, 1990, 1994; Antonucci & Aklyama, 1987b; Barnett et al., 1987; Cohler & Lieberman, 1980; Frieze et al., 1978; Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Schultz, 1991; Silverman, 1987), it is hypothesized that the perception of positive support from these relationships will vary on the basis of gender. Specifically, it is proposed that women will report receiving more positive support from their children and from friends/other relatives than will men, while men will report receiving more positive support from their spouses than will women.

Furthermore, in assessing the perceived level of demands made by these relationships, it is hypothesized that women will perceive all three types of relationships as more demanding than will men. This is based on findings that indicate women are called upon more often than men by network members for support (Schultz, 1991).

Hypothesis II

Although there is less known about the direct effect of age on the perceived quality of social support relationships, studies that have been done (Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Levitt et al., 1993) lend support to a hypothesis that age level, too, will evince a direct effect on both the perception of positive support and the perception of level of demandingness across these relationships. Specifically, it is expected that there will be a general increase in the perception of positive support across age groups, coupled with a general decrease in the perception of demandingness across these relationships.

Additionally, given the largely unreciprocated nature of a parent’s relationship with his or her young and adolescent children, it is hypothesized that one’s relationship with one’s children will be rated as providing the least positive support, and as being the most demanding, for younger respondents. However, it is expected that both perceptions will change as age level increases. Many elderly adults report receiving high levels of support from their adult children, while few report these relationships as being overly demanding (Ishii-Kuntz, 1990). Thus, it is likely that perception of positive support will increase with age level, while the perception of demandingness will decrease.

Hypothesis III

It is expected that there will be an interaction effect of age level and gender. Given prior research findings indicating that women are particularly vulnerable to feeling a decrease in positive support while experiencing an increase in support demands at certain life stages (e.g., after the birth of their first child, during middle adulthood) (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Ingersoll-Dayton & Antonucci, 1988; Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Troll, 1987), it is expected that there will be more variation in perception of positive support and level of demandingness for women than for men across age groups.

Methods

Sample

This research analyzes the main and interaction effects of age level and gender on the relative perceived quality of support received from one’s spouse, children, and friends/other relatives across six adult developmental stages. This is a secondary analysis of data gathered as part of the larger Americans’ Changing Lives (ACL) data set collected by James S. House (1986 & 1989). These data constitute the second wave in a national longitudinal panel survey of people aged 27 years or older in the United States. Sampling consisted of a multistage stratified area probability sample,
with over sampling of those 60 years-of-age and older. Data were collected during face-to-face interviews conducted by interviewers trained at the Survey Research Center in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

A subsample of respondents from the larger study sample used in this research consisted of 2,867 Caucasian women and men aged 27 years and older. The decision to control for racial differences by including only Caucasian adults in the sample was based on research that indicates there are significant differences in the social support networks of African Americans and Caucasians (Lynch, in press; Petchers & Milligan, 1987; Weinberger, Hiner, & Tierney, 1987). Since the focus of this research is on age and gender differences across the life span, and treating these populations as homogenous is theoretically and methodologically flawed, the decision was made to examine only a Caucasian sample to control for the effect of race.

The sample was further reduced as a function of the comparative nature of this research which focuses on the perception of quality of support across three types of relationships – with spouse, children, and friends/other relatives. The final sample consists of only those respondents who reported having all three types of relationships at the time of data collection, resulting in a final sample \( n = 1154 \). Table 1 presents a summary of the sample divided by age and gender.

**Operational Definitions of Variables**

The predictor variables used in this analysis were age, gender, and the interaction of these variables. In order to ascertain the effect of age, the continuous age variable in the original data set was divided into six age groups based on the stages of adulthood identified by Ishii-Kuntz (1990). The resulting six categories were: i) young-adult: 27–30-years-old; ii) early middle-age: 31–40-years-old; iii) middle-age: 41–50-years-old; iv) late middle-age: 51–64-years-old; v) young-old: 65–74-years-old; and vi) old-old: 75–98-years-old. Because there were no respondents in the young-adult category who had all three types of relationships, this category was eliminated. For analysis, the categorical variable gender was dummy coded into a dichotomous variable with males coded as 1 and females coded as 2.

Positive support was operationalized by replicating the positive support indices created by House and Kahn (1985) using equivalent items from ACL: Wave 1. Respondents were asked to rate their spouse, their children, and their friends or other relatives separately in response to the items “(this person) makes me feel loved and cared for” and “(this person) is willing to listen to me.” A positive support index was then formed for each relationship by averaging the Likert scale responses to these items (1 = a great deal; 2 = quite a bit; 3 = some; 4 = a little; 5 = not at all). The internal consistency for each index was measured using Cronbach’s alpha in order to assess reliability. All alpha coefficients were .70 or greater.

Demandingness was operationalized by using a single indicator. Again respondents were asked to rate their spouse, children, and friends or other relatives separately on a Likert scale in response to the item “(this person) makes too many demands on me.” The anchors for this variable were: 1 = a great deal; 2 = quite a bit; 3 = some; 4 = a little; 5 = not at all.

The positive support indices and the demandingness indicator were used to measure respondents’ perception of the quality of support received across three types of relationships – spousal, children, and friends/other relatives. Obviously, the last category of relationship – friends or other relatives – is problematic. It is highly probable that relationships with friends are quite different from relationships with other relatives, especially considering that siblings would be included in the “other relative” category. Indeed, in most studies, relationships with friends and with siblings are considered separately and are often shown to relate to support variables in distinct ways (Wilson, Calzyn, & Orloffsky, 1994).

Unfortunately, in this data set, these relationships cannot be separated for analysis. But despite the problems with this variable, it is clear from the analyses that there are both age and gender differences in the perception of positive support from the relationships it represents. Therefore, it is included in the present study with the acknowledgment that findings related to this variable must be interpreted with caution.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using a repeated measures design multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). This design allowed the rating of perception of positive support and level of demandingness for each type of relationship to be considered in relation to each other by testing for within-subject variation. Additionally, the effects of age, gender, and their interaction were measured by identifying these variables as between-subject factors.
Results

Hypothesis I

The results of the MANOVA, shown in Table 2, offer partial support for Hypothesis I. As expected, the main effect of gender on the perception of positive support is statistically significant. Although both women and men tend to rate all three relationships highly in terms of positive support, women appear to have a more positive perception of the support they receive from their children and from their friends than do men. In contrast, men tend to perceive the support they receive from their spouses more positively than do women. Further, while men perceive their wives as providing the most positive support, women tend to rate the support received from their husbands as being the most positive. Gender also appears to have a direct effect on the perception of positive support across the three types of relationships. Men generally rate the positive support they receive from their wives more highly than women rate the positive support they receive from their husbands. Women rate the support received from their children and friends/other relatives more highly than men rate the support received from these relationships.

However, contrary to expectations, the effect of gender on demandingness is not statistically significant (see Table 3). Men and women tend to rate the demandingness of these relationships similarly and these similarities appear to be stable across age groups. Men and women in all age groups except the oldest (75- to 98-years-old) rate their friends/other relatives as less demanding than their spouses and children. After age 51, both men and women rate their spouses as being the most demanding. Indeed, although women between the ages of 31 and 50 rate their children as being most demanding, men between the ages of 31 and 40 rate their spouses and children as being similarly demanding. While men seem to perceive the support received from their spouses the most positively, they also appear to see these relationships as being the most demanding. For both men and women, children and friends/other relatives appear to offer a high level of positive support without being perceived as being overly demanding.

Hypothesis II

These findings also offer only partial support for Hypothesis II. The combined observed means for

Table 2. MANOVA – Perception of Positive Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range &amp; Gender</th>
<th>Positive Support</th>
<th>Positive Support</th>
<th>Positive Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>Child(ren)</td>
<td>Friends/Relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–50</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–64</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–74</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Averaged tests of significance: SS = F

Positive Support (PS): 27.49 25.62***
PS by gender: 51.22 47.73***
PS by age: 53.84 12.54***
PS by age by gender: 7.19 1.68

*Lower means equal a more positive perception of support. **p < .05; ***p < .01; ****p < .001.

Table 3. MANOVA – Perception of Demandingness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range &amp; Gender</th>
<th>Demandingness Spouse</th>
<th>Demandingness Child(ren)</th>
<th>Demandingness Friends/Relatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–50</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–64</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–74</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined means</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Averaged tests of significance: SS = F

Relative demandingness (demands): 124.59 77.72***
Demands by gender: 1.54 0.96
Demands by age: 44.73 6.98***
Demands by age by gender: 3.80 0.59

*Lower means equal a more positive perception of more demandingness. **p < .05; ***p < .01; ****p < .001.
within-subject effect of age-level on the positive support indices for spouse, children, and friends/other relatives are presented in Table 2. These data indicate that all three types of relationships offer a fairly high level of positive support across age groups. However, contrary to expectations, the perception of positive support from these relationships did not increase with age level. Indeed, only one of the relationships, that with children, evinced an increase in perceived positive support across age groups. The perception of support from the other two relationships remained fairly stable for each age group, although the perception of support from friends/other relatives does seem to have a somewhat curvilinear relation with age level.

As predicted, for all three relationships, the perception of demandingness decreases as age level increases. Although the mean scores indicate that none of the relationships are perceived as being highly demanding, relationships with friends/other relatives appear to be the least demanding for both men and women.

**Hypothesis III**

These data do not support the expected interaction effect for age level and gender on either perceived positive support or perceived demandingness. The interaction term for age level and gender was not statistically significant in the analyses. When the means for perception of positive support for the five age groups are broken down by gender, as presented in Table 2, it is clear that the gender differences discussed before are consistent across age groups. Similarly, age-level differences noted in the perception of demandingness from all three types of relationships do not appear to interact with gender (Table 3).

**Discussion**

These analyses indicate that gender does affect the perception of positive support from one's spouse, children, and friends/other relatives. However, it does not appear to significantly affect the perception of demandingness from these same relationships. Additionally, although it was expected that all three relationships would be perceived more positively as age level increased, this was true only for the perception of support from one's children. The perception of support from one's spouse and friends/other relatives appears to remain relatively stable across age groups. However, as expected, all three relationships were perceived as less demanding as age level increased. Finally, contrary to expectations, there was no significant interaction effect for gender and age level on either the perception of positive support or the perception of demandingness for any of these relationships.

The direct effect of gender on the perception of positive support is consistent with prior research findings (Antonucci, 1990, 1994; Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987b; Barnett et al., 1987; Cohler & Lieberman, 1980; Frieze et al., 1978; Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Schultz, 1991; Silverman, 1987).

However, unlike previous studies, these data present strong evidence that children provide women with a more consistently positive source of support than do their husbands. What is surprising is that the ratings women give for the support received from their spouses and that received from their friends/other relatives vary, at most, by .3 of a point. This would indicate that, contrary to previous findings, women do not see their friends and relatives as being significantly more supportive than their spouses.

Also interesting is the fact that men rate the support they receive from their children as being as positive as that received from their friends/other relatives, even at life stages when children are presumably young. This provides evidence that men may receive satisfaction and support from their children across the life span.

These findings have implications for the mental health of both men and women throughout the life span. For example, when working with male clients for whom marital or partnership disruption is an issue, mental health practitioners should be aware that male clients may become socially isolated, and may not have many support resources available to them. Indeed, male clients who lose their spouses through death or divorce may be losing their most positive source of support, and may be particularly vulnerable to depression and feelings of hopelessness.

Conversely, when working with women, it is important to be aware that women may receive a significant amount of support from their friends and adult children. Indeed, for women age 65 and older, it appears that their most supportive relationships are with their children, even when they have a spouse. This finding is important when one considers the mobility of modern society, and the fact that this study measured support quality (e.g., the extent to which one “felt loved and cared for” and “listened to”), and not support function (e.g., type of support actually exchanged), which can be an indication of actual proximity. It is possible that a significant number of married older women feel a strong emotional connection to their children, but are in fact geographically isolated from them.

These findings also are important when working with women who are moving due to career or other life changes. Whereas men are probably taking their most important source of support with them, women are likely to be leaving significant relationships behind. Additionally, in this context, it is important to note that, as the population ages, women may be outliving their adult children, especially sons. In these instances, counseling may be needed to deal not only with grief, but also with the loss of an important source of perceived support.

Perhaps the most surprising findings, however, are those regarding relative perception of demandingness. Although it was expected that women would rate their spouses as being relatively more demanding than their children and friends/other relatives, it was not expected that men would also perceive their wives as being most demanding. This is due to the fact that men consistently report their spousal rela-
friendships given the demands of their jobs and families. They have little or no time to spare on maintaining relationships with one's spouse and children, especially for middle-aged and middle-aged. Given that this is a time when people may feel the strain of providing a large amount of support to children and aging parents, friends may offer a relatively stress-free source of social interaction. Unfortunately, at this life stage, previous studies indicate that people may feel they have little or no time to spare on maintaining friendships given the demands of their jobs and families (Ingersoll-Dayton & Antonucci, 1988; Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Troll, 1987).

Interestingly, except for the respondents in the early-middle- and middle-age groups when children are likely to be in middle childhood or adolescence, spouses are viewed as being the most demanding of the three relationships. Although none of the relationships appear to be overly demanding, this highlights what may be the ongoing give and take in the marital relationship as opposed to other relationships that continue to be positive sources of support and are perceived as less demanding with increasing age. Additionally, when working with couples, it is important to understand how the perception of positive support and demandingness can affect each partner's view of the relationship. Although both partners may perceive the demands made by their spouse similarly, the woman may be more dissatisfied if she does not share her spouse's view of the positive support available from the relationship. Additionally, the man may be hurt and confused by his wife's different perception of the balance between positive support received and demands made.

This may be particularly important when considering that many people over age 65 who are married may be facing more and more physical limitations at the same time that their spouse is experiencing similar problems. There is a need to thoroughly assess the support and respite needs of elderly couples, especially those who are childless or who have infrequent contact with their children. This is especially true for men, who may not receive needed support from friends and other informal sources.

Men do perceive the support they receive from their children and their friends/other relatives positively, and they do not seem to see these relationships as overly demanding. In contrast to previous studies that indicate men do not receive a high level of support from their children (Schultz, 1991; Vaux, 1985), the male respondents in this sample seem to perceive their children's support very positively. It may be that as men are participating more in the rearing of their children, they are cultivating relationships with them that are closer and more intimate. These relationships, in turn, may become effective sources of support for men who have lost their spouses.

Conclusions

This study investigates age and gender differences in the relative perception of social support across adulthood. The results of this study not only replicate many previous findings, but also add to the existing knowledge base on social support. These data offer new evidence that children provide both mothers and fathers with strong feelings of love and support throughout the life span. Additionally, although on average, male respondents rated their spouses most positively in terms of support, the mean ratings for the support they receive from their children also were quite positive.

Also important is the evidence that, despite the fact that men tend to view spousal support more positively than do women, there is no significant gender difference in the rating of spousal demandingness. This finding may help further our understanding of the complexity of marital relationships, especially in regard to marital satisfaction.

Finally, the analysis of these data indicates that there is no interaction effect for age and gender on either the positive perception of social support or the perception of demandingness. This suggests that the changes in the perception of social support that appear to occur for both men and women at different life stages remain consistent in terms of evinced gender differences. Most unexpected was the finding that the perception of demandingness from spouses, children, and friends and other relatives are not significantly different for women and men even at different age levels.

Although this research adds to the understanding of how gender and age affect the perception of social support, the interpretation of the analyses is restricted by the fact that the data are cross-sectional as opposed to longitudinal. For this reason, many of the age differences may simply be a result of a cohort effect. Because several of the age-related differences have implications for mental health practice, it is important that future research examine these relations in a longitudinal design. Fortunately, the data set used in this research is the second wave of such a longitudinal study. Therefore, the research regarding age differences in social support begun here can be expanded in the future.

In conclusion, there are two ways in which future research needs to expand upon the present study. First, in order to control for racial differences, the sample used in this study was composed exclusively of Caucasians. Although this allowed these analyses to focus on age and gender, it is highly probable that there are significant racial differences in how age and gender affect the dimensions of social support. Therefore, it is important that future replications include a racially diverse sample.

Additionally, these analyses are limited to the examination of gender and age effects on only one
dimension of social support – perceived quality. An important next step is to examine whether and/or how differences in these personal characteristics affect the structure and function of support networks as well as mental and physical well-being of adults across the life span.

References


Received June 28, 1996

Accepted December 9, 1997