

**NOT BAD, FOR A MAN: SHIFTING STANDARDS IN THE PROVISION OF  
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT WITHIN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

by

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Previous research has found mixed results in terms of gender differences in the provision of emotional support to a relationship partner. Some studies support the popular stereotype that women are more emotionally supportive than men, while others find no gender differences in the amount of emotional support men and women provide to one another in a romantic relationship. These conflicting findings may be the result of shifting standards for men and women in terms of the amount of emotional support that is expected to be provided by each within a relationship. Since women are stereotypically assumed to be more nurturing and emotionally supportive than men, more emotional support will be expected of them in comparison with men who are assumed to be unemotional and largely unsupportive of their partners. Therefore, women will be held to a higher standard than men with regard to the provision of emotional support. The purpose of the current study was to test this shifting standards effect as it relates to the provision of emotional support within dating relationships. Heterosexual male and female undergraduates currently involved in a dating relationship were asked to rate their partners' provision of emotional support using either an objective scale or a subjective scale. It was predicted that objective ratings of emotional support provision would reflect stereotypical gender differences with women being rated as providing more support than men. However, subjective ratings, which are subject to shifting standards, would not display gender differences in the provision of emotional support. These results were predicted to be associated with within-gender social comparison and

adherence to gender stereotypes. Contrary to predictions, women rated their partners as providing significantly more emotional support than men on both the objective and subjective scales. Despite this fact, analyses of items measuring within-gender and between-gender comparisons revealed that participants adhered to the stereotype that women typically provide more emotional support than men. Ratings of emotional support provision were related to adherence to benevolent stereotypes about men and women, especially for men. The implications of these surprising results and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

It is commonly assumed that women are more nurturing and emotionally supportive in their relationships than men (Tannen, 1990). This belief is reflected in research which has found that, in their daily lives, both men and women report turning more often to women for emotional support than men (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). Movies and television shows are rife with examples of emotionally inept men who are unable to provide their partners with the emotional support they need (Olson & Douglas, 1997). It is not only popular culture which supports this stereotype (although it is certainly exaggerated there); social scientists have also found evidence of the superior ability of women to provide emotional support as compared with men (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999; MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003; Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1983). Yet, given all of the research support and popular opinion that women should be more emotionally supportive partners than men, previous research often fails to find a gender difference in the amount of emotional support that spouses provide to one another (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Heffner, Kiecolt-Glaser, Loving, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2004; Katz, Beach, & Anderson, 1996; Stets, 1995; Xu & Burleson, 2001). The purpose of the current study was to examine a possible cause of these conflicting findings. Specifically it was suggested that men and women are held to different standards when it comes to assessing emotional support

provision within a relationship. In this way men may be getting more credit for the emotional support they provide to their partners than women.

If women are stereotyped as being nurturing and supportive partners, they will be expected to provide more of this type of support and be held to a higher standard than men. It may be that men in reality provide less emotional support to their partners than women but, because less is expected of them, this support is deemed as sufficient by women. In other words, what is “good enough” for a man is different from what is considered to be “good enough” for a woman because men and women are held to different standards in the domain of emotional support.

Biernat and Manis (1994) investigated this shifting standards effect for a very different issue in a sample of undergraduates. The researchers asked participants to rate the quality of an article in which both the gender of the author (male or female) and the topic of the article (masculine, feminine, or neutral) were manipulated. Participants were given either an objective scale (assigning a letter grade) or subjective scale (likert scale ranging from “excellent” to “terrible”) with which to evaluate the article. The authors predicted that the objective ratings would reflect gender bias based on the stereotypical content of the articles, but the subjective ratings would not display this bias because the standard for a man writing about a feminine topic is different from that of a woman writing the same article. Results supported this hypothesis. The masculine articles were rated objectively higher when they were described as written by a man than a woman; however, there was no gender difference in the subjective ratings for these articles. The same was true for the feminine articles. When the article was described as being written by a woman it was rated objectively higher than when it was described as being written

by a man, but subjective ratings of the feminine article did not display this gender bias (Biernat & Manis, 1994).

The authors theorized that these results occurred because stereotypes implicitly activated different interpretations of the endpoints of the subjective scales (Biernat & Manis, 1994). In other words, what was considered to be “good” for a woman writing about a feminine topic was considered to be “excellent” for a man completing the same task. The same theory may be applied to the level of emotional support provided to a relationship partner. Because providing emotional support is stereotyped as being a feminine task (Tannen, 1990), what is considered to be good emotional support when provided by a woman may be viewed as exceptionally good support when provided by a man. If this is the case, objective measures of emotional support will reveal the typical gender difference in emotional support provision, with women being rated higher than men; however, a subjective measure of emotional support will not show any gender differences.

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the shifting standards effect with regard to emotional support provision within dating heterosexual relationships. This research can shed light on contradictory findings in gender differences in the provision of emotional support to a romantic partner as well as add to the literature on the implicit effects of stereotypes. In order to test this effect, dating undergraduates were asked to report on the amount of emotional support provided by their partners using either an objective scale or a subjective scale. It was predicted that an interaction would occur between the gender of the target and the type of rating scale, such that, women would be rated as providing more emotional support than men when participants rate their partners using an objective scale, but this difference will disappear and perhaps even reverse when participants are asked to use a subjective scale to rate their partners.

## **1.1 THE DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IN RELATIONSHIPS**

Before discussing why standards of emotional support provision might be different for men and women, it is important to review how social support has been defined and measured within relationships. Generally support is said to occur when one person attempts to help another person by providing some form of informational, emotional, or tangible assistance (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokan, 1990). Cutrona (1996) defined four primary types of social support that typically occur within relationships. Informational support, which consists of giving advice and assistance in appraising a situation, and tangible assistance, which involves providing concrete aid in completing a task or attaining a goal, are often conceptualized as action-facilitating support since they are intended to help an individual solve or eliminate a problem (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Emotional support, which is defined as expressions of love, empathy, and concern, and esteem support, which are expressions that convey that the support recipient is valued and admired, are sometimes referred to as nurturant support since the goal of this type of support is not to take direct action to solve a problem, but rather to assist an individual by providing comfort and consolation (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Effective emotional support conveys to a target that he/she is loved and admired (Cutrona, 1996).

Emotional support is especially important to investigate because there is some evidence that emotional support is more beneficial to recipients than action-facilitating support in a wider variety of circumstances. In a sample of mostly married, mostly female cancer patients, Dunkel-Schetter (1984) found that participants rated some form of emotional support as most helpful to them. Expressions of love and concern were rated as the most helpful forms of support followed

by expressions of understanding. The source of support may also be important in determining the effectiveness of emotional support compared with other forms of support. For example, in Dunkel-Schetter's (1984) research, patients rated informational support as helpful primarily when it was provided by physicians and health professionals. But, this form of support was often rated as unhelpful by the patient when it was provided by friends and family members. Emotional support, on the other hand was rated as helpful regardless of whether it was provided by health professionals or friends and family members (Dunkel-Schetter, 1984). While emotional support may be deemed helpful regardless of the source, it is more likely to be provided by close, intimate partners rather than professionals or acquaintances (Lindorff, 2005). For this reason the receipt of emotional support in a romantic relationship is vitally important.

### **1.1.1 Gender stereotypes of the provision of emotional support**

Gender stereotypes typically classify women as communal and expressive and men as agentic and instrumental (Rudman & Glick, 2008). According to social role theory (Eagley, 1987), gender stereotypes reflect actual gender differences in status and roles. Stereotypically masculine characteristics, e.g. independent, competitive, and aggressive, are those that would be expected of a person who is of high status and a breadwinner (more often found for men) while feminine characteristics, such as dependent, nurturing, and submissive, are descriptive of an individual of low status and a caregiver (more often found for women). Stereotypically feminine traits serve to maintain the current status and role differences experienced by men and women by describing women as “wonderful but weak” and men as “bad but bold”(Glick, et al., 2004, p. 714).

Rather than having completely positive or negative attitudes towards the other gender, men and women often have mixed emotions about one another. Glick and Fiske (1996) outline these attitudes in their theory of ambivalent sexism. According to this theory, individuals hold both hostile and benevolent feelings towards the other sex. A hostile attitude towards women, or hostile sexism (HS), involves feelings of contempt towards women (particularly those who fulfill nontraditional roles). A benevolent attitude toward women, or benevolent sexism (BS), is a paternalistic and even admiring attitude towards women. This form of sexism characterizes women as beautiful, yet vulnerable creatures who are in need of men's protection. At the same time it expresses a feeling that no man is complete without a woman's love (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Men and women can also hold hostile and benevolent attitudes towards men. Hostile attitudes towards men (HM), reflect a resentment of male dominance and egoism while benevolent attitudes towards men (BM) reflect a positive attitude towards men as providers and protectors who deserve to be cared for by women (Glick & Fiske, 1999). Both BS and BM portray a picture of gender interdependence in which women are the primary providers of emotional support in a relationship. BS characterizes women as loving and nurturing individuals; while BM characterizes men as in need of and deserving a woman's love and support.

Previous social support research also gives evidence that supportiveness is typically a feminine trait. Belle (1982) originally coined the term "support gap" to refer to the discrepancy in the amount of care giving women provide to their families and in their occupations compared with that of men. She criticized researchers for providing what she referred to as a "genderless picture of social support" (p. 497). Belle (1982) asserted that while researchers were correct in their assumption that social support could come from anyone, in reality a majority of support

both inside and outside of the home is provided by women. Furthermore, women are often involved in relationships in which they provide more support than they receive. This discrepancy between the amount of support that women provide to others and the amount that they receive in return is what Belle (1982) referred to as the “support gap”. The focus of this original article on the support gap was the instrumental and tangible support that women provide to others. For example, Belle (1982) notes that most female dominated occupations such as teaching, nursing, and social work require women to provide tangible support to others with no hope of receiving support in return. At home, women are primarily responsible for taking care of both children and elderly relatives (Belle, 1982). Other researchers have noted this continued disparity in the amount of housework and childcare that is provided by women compared with that of their husbands (Steil, 2000).

In recent years the support gap theory has been expanded to include gender differences in the provision of *emotional* support (Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Ickes, 2007). According to gender stereotypes, women value the emotional qualities of relationships more than men (Tannen, 1990) and therefore would be likely to provide more emotional support to their relationship partners than men. It should be noted that previous research has indicated that men are sometimes more likely to provide more instrumental support to their spouses than women (Beach & Gupta, 2006); however, the focus of the current study is on emotional support which is theorized to be provided more often by women than men.

There are several explanations for why women would provide more emotional support to their romantic partners than men. First, due to gender role socialization, women have more practice providing emotional support to others than men. Women typically have larger support networks than men (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987) and report receiving and providing more

emotional support to friends and family than men (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998; Stevens & Westerhof, 2006). Gender role prescriptions restrict men in the level of emotional expression they are permitted to show in relationships (particularly within same-sex friendships). Expression of emotions is typically associated with femininity and seeking emotional support from others conflicts with the masculine ideals of invulnerability and independence (O'Neil, 1981).

In order to test the extent to which traditional gender ideologies prohibit men from receiving and providing social support, Burda and Vaux (1987) assessed endorsement of traditional masculine attitudes and various social support variables in a sample of male undergraduate students. The researchers found that endorsement of traditional attitudes about masculinity was negatively correlated with several indicators of social support, such as, the likelihood of seeking social support when in need, the perceived level of support from friends and family, perceived closeness with friends, and the level of emotional support received from male friends (Burda & Vaux, 1987). Given these gender role restrictions, it is not surprising that women typically participate in more intimate interactions with friends than men on an everyday basis (Reis, Senchak, & Solomon, 1985).

This prior experience with providing support to friends means that when women enter into a romantic relationship, they have had more experience than men participating in an intimate relationship in which the provision and receipt of emotional support is expected. It is likely that this experience will allow women to become more skilled in the provision of emotional support than men. This theory has been tested by several researchers. Surprisingly, laboratory experiments often fail to find a gender difference in this skill. For example, Reis and colleagues (1985) found no gender differences in the level of intimacy expressed in a laboratory setting

when men and women were asked to have an intimate conversation with their best same-sex friend. However, in their daily lives both men and women report turning more often to women for emotional support than men (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). If individuals prefer the emotional support of women over men in their everyday lives, it may be because women are typically better at providing effective emotional support in “real world” settings than men.

In order to test this theory, Wheeler, Reis, and Nezlek (1983) asked college seniors to keep a diary of their daily interactions with others for several days. At the end of the diary period, participants were asked to complete a standard measure of loneliness. Results indicated that the more an individual interacted with females, the less lonely he/she was. There was no relationship found between the number of interactions with males and loneliness. These results indicate support for the theory that women are better able to provide effective support in everyday settings.

Kunkel and Burleson (1999) also found evidence that women excel in daily emotional support skills as compared with men. Male and female undergraduates were asked to rate the sensitivity and effectiveness of several comforting messages created by the researchers in response to various hypothetical situations. In addition, participants were asked to indicate whether they thought the message was generated by a woman or a man. The comforting messages varied in their level of person-centeredness. Person-centeredness is defined as, “message behavior that reflects an awareness of and adaptation to the subjective, affective, and relational aspects of communicative contexts” (Burleson, 1987 p. 305) . Both men and women evaluated messages high in person-centeredness to be most effective in comforting the distressed individual. In addition, both men and women perceived these messages to be generated by women and those low in person-centeredness to be generated by men (Kunkel & Burleson,

1999). Thus, both men and women felt that the most effective, emotionally responsive messages were generated by women.

In support of this belief, MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, and Clark (2003) found that female undergraduates did, in fact, produce more person-centered messages than male undergraduates in response to hypothetical scenarios in which a close friend was depicted as being distressed. This means that women were more likely to generate effective emotionally supportive messages than men. These results support what Kunkel and Burleson (1999) refer to as the “skill specialization” account of gender differences in emotional support provision. According to this theory, socialization emphasizes the development of emotional support skills in girls and women more so than in boys and men. This leads to a skill deficit in men’s ability to provide effective support in everyday situations (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). This means that, due to gender role socialization, girls and women are able to develop skills as emotionally responsive caregivers more so than boys and men. Just as these skills are used when providing support to a friend, women are also likely to use these skills when providing support to a romantic partner.

Yet despite popular opinion, and research support, that women should be better able to provide emotional support to their partners than men, previous research on gender differences in the provision of emotional support to a spouse has produced conflicting results. With some studies finding the predicted gender difference of women providing more support to their partners than men (Depner & Ingersoll-Dayton, 1985; Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986), others finding no gender differences (Heffner, et al., 2004; Katz, et al., 1996) and still others finding gender differences on some measures of support but not on others (Cutrona, Hessling, & Suhr,

1997; Verhofstadt, et al., 2007). In order to interpret these conflicting results, it is important to look carefully at how emotional support has been measured in relationships.

### **1.1.2 Gender differences in the provision of emotional support within a relationship**

Researchers have attempted to quantify social support in a number of different ways. Social support scales have measured everything from the number of supportive persons in one's life to general feelings of being supported and loved (Sarason, Edward, Pierce, & Sarason, 1987). Social support interactions within romantic couples are said to occur when the partners discuss problems that exist outside of the relationship. Discussions of internal problems, those within the relationship, often lead to conflict interactions; whereas, discussions of external problems, typically those that are personal to one partner, provide the opportunity for support provision and receipt (Barker & Lemle, 1984). Measures of the support provided during these interactions fall into two broad categories. Self-report measures ask individuals to report on their personal feelings of the availability of support from their partner (Heffner, et al., 2004) or give estimates of how often their partner performs specific support behaviors (Dehle, Larsen, & Landers, 2001). Observational measures typically consist of researchers rating the specific support behaviors of participants during a support interaction in a laboratory setting (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Within these broad categories, there are various ways in which researchers have attempted to tap the important aspects of support within couples.

For example, self-report measures of support typically assess either perceived support or received support. Perceived support refers to individuals' general feelings of love and acceptance and measures the extent to which they feel that support will be available to them if

they need it (Wethington & Kessler, 1986). This type of rating of support is very subjective and has been shown to be biased by a number of outside variables including participants' mood (Iida, Seidman, Shrout, Fujita, & Bolger, 2008), personality (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983), or attachment style (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Therefore, it is likely that this type of measurement of support could also be influenced by individuals' standards of what is sufficient in terms of emotional support provision for men and women. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

Self-report measures of received support are more specific and behaviorally based than those that measure perceived support. One commonly used measure of received support within intimate relationships is Dehle and colleagues' (2001) Support in Intimate Relationships Rating Scale (SIRRS). This measure asks participants to indicate how often their partners performed various specific support behaviors, such as giving advice or holding their hand. These support behaviors are designed to tap the different types of support outlined by Cutrona (1996): informational, emotional, esteem, and tangible support. After indicating the actual frequency of these behaviors, participants are asked to indicate the desired frequency of each support behavior. By subtracting the actual frequency of support behaviors from the desired frequency of the same behavior, researchers are able to assess support adequacy. In other words, how well individuals' support needs are met by their partners. This measure of adequacy has been found to be significantly associated with indices of marital outcomes, such as marital quality and adjustment, in a sample of married male and female undergraduates (Dehle, et al., 2001). Given that they ask participants to recall the frequency of specific support behaviors rather than simply their perception that support will be there when they need it, received support measures also seem to be more objective than those of perceived support.

An even more objective measure of emotional support provision in romantic couples comes from observational studies. Observational measures of support within couples seek to remove personal bias by assessing actual, enacted support behaviors in a laboratory setting. Pasch and colleagues (1997b) developed one commonly used observational paradigm to measure social support seeking and provision in couples. In this paradigm, couples are brought into the laboratory and asked to identify a personal problem or something about themselves that they would like to change. It is made clear to participants that this should be a problem that exists outside of the relationship rather than a disagreement within the relationship. One individual is randomly chosen to act as the support seeker (helpee) and told to discuss his/her problem with the partner. The partner, who is acting as the support provider (helper) during this discussion, is told to respond to the helpee in whatever way he/she wishes. After a 10 minute interaction, the roles are reversed and the individual who originally served as the helpee becomes the helper for his/her partner. The two 10 minute discussions are videotaped and coded by trained research assistants using the Social Support Interaction Coding System (SSICS; Pasch et al., 1997b). This coding system was developed based upon extensive research on what behaviors individuals find to be supportive within their relationships (Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997b).

This procedure has several advantages over self-report measures of emotional support. The largest is its ability to assess support provision without the influence of other relationship and personality variables. However, it lacks mundane realism. For example, in the “real world” individuals are often not given any warning that their partner is going to be discussing a personal problem with them and will need their support. Researchers have attempted to overcome this limitation and measure actual enacted support in a laboratory setting in a more realistic manner by observing the support that is spontaneously offered to the partner when the partner is

distressed. For example, Simpson and colleagues (1992) brought undergraduate dating couples into the laboratory and told the female partner that she would have to endure a stressful situation during the experiment. The male partner was not given this information and the couple was left alone in a waiting room under video surveillance for 5 minutes while the researchers ostensibly set up equipment. Trained research assistants then rated the woman's level of anxiety and the extent to which she sought comfort from her partner and the degree to which men offered reassurance and emotional support to their partner during the spontaneous interaction. Using this procedure, or a spontaneous support procedure similar to this, researchers have found that individual differences in attachment styles are related to women's support seeking and men's support provision (Simpson, et al., 1992), the level of anxiety experienced by women while they are waiting with their partner (Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999), and the support provision of the individual's partner (Collins & Feeney, 2004). While this procedure is certainly more realistic than the procedure developed by Pasch and colleagues (Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997), it is still only able to assess a brief support interaction within a controlled environment. In addition, it is difficult to assess gender differences in emotional support provision using this methodology since previous research has either only looked at women as the support recipient (Rholes, et al., 1999; Simpson, et al., 1992) or did not specifically evaluate gender differences (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Ultimately it is not a question of which type of measurement is better, observational or self-report, but rather what the researcher is seeking to assess. Observational measures are superior to self-report measures in objectively assessing the ability of individuals to provide support to their partners, but self-report measures are better able to assess whether this skill is utilized outside of a laboratory setting. Since the purpose of the proposed study is to

assess whether or not rating scales influence individuals' assessments of how well their partner provides them with support on a day-to-day basis, self-report measures will be utilized.

The type of measurement used to assess emotional support becomes important when analyzing the conflicting findings in terms of gender differences in emotional support provision within couples. Some studies have found gender differences in primacy of the spouse as an emotional support provider. For example, Huston-Hoburg and Strange (1986) asked married, returning adult students to assess the degree of emotional support they received from a list of significant others and then to identify their most significant source of emotional support. Within this sample, men rated their spouses as providing significantly more emotional support than women and were more likely than women to nominate their spouse as their most significant source of emotional support (83% of men chose their spouse, compared with 56% of women). Similarly, Depner & Ingersoll-Dayton (1985) found that, in a sample of married older (over 50) adults, women were significantly less likely than men to report turning to their spouse for reassurance, confiding, and talking things over when they were upset.

However, not all studies assessing self-reported spousal support have found significant gender differences. Stets (1995) found no significant gender differences in a sample of newlywed couples (married 2 weeks to 3 months) with regard to the level of emotional support they received from their spouse. Couples were asked to assess how helpful their spouse was when they were bothered by something and felt the need to talk to someone, were lonely and needed someone to talk to, felt sad and needed to be cheered up, and had something good happen that they wanted to share with someone. Results indicated no significant gender differences in ratings of spouse helpfulness both at time 1 and at a follow up appointment 1 year later.

Other studies have found similar null results when assessing other forms of nurturant support. For example, Katz and colleagues (1996) found no gender differences among married men and women with regard to esteem support, measured with items such as, “My spouse thinks highly of me.”, or confiding, measured with items such as, “I feel I can share my most private worries and fears with my spouse”. Although the researchers were not measuring emotional support per se, esteem support is another form of nurturant support (Cutrona, 1996) and confiding is closely related to the provision of emotional support (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Thus, the same results would be expected for these measures as measures of emotional support.

Using an adaptation of the Social Support Questionnaire (Sarason, et al., 1983), Heffner and colleagues (2004) assessed gender differences in the provision of spousal support in both a newlywed (married 4-6 months) and older (age 55-75) sample. Researchers asked participants to indicate all of the people they can count on for support in different domains and then rate how satisfied they were with the support provided by this individual. Results revealed no significant gender differences in either the number of times a spouse was mentioned as a source of support or satisfaction with spousal support for both samples.

Some studies have even found conflicting results within the same sample of participants. Cutrona and colleagues (1997) assessed both enacted support and perceived supportiveness in a sample of married couples (married an average of 3.6 years). These researchers used a paradigm that was similar to the one described by Pasch and colleagues (Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997). Participants took turns acting as the support recipient and support provider in two 10-minute interactions in which one participant disclosed a personal problem to his/her spouse. However, these interactions were coded using the Social Support Behavior Codes (SSBC; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). The SSBC categorizes support behaviors as meeting one of the support

provisions of relationships outlined by Cutrona (1996) : emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support. Coded emotional support behaviors were those that communicated love, concern, or empathy. After the videotaped interaction, participants were asked to indicate how supportive they felt their partner was during the interaction using a self-report measure that was a composite of all five types of support. Results revealed gender differences in the receipt of observed emotional support behaviors during the interaction. Women were coded as providing more emotional support to their spouse during the observed interaction than men. No gender differences were found in the self-report measure of perceived supportiveness of the spouse.

Thus, when support provision was assessed by objective observers, women were rated as providing more emotional support than men. However, when the participants were asked to report on their receipt of emotional support during the same interaction using a subjective assessment of emotional support, no gender differences were reported. It should be noted that the gender differences found in the observational measurement of enacted support are unusual. A majority of studies which measure observed enacted support fail to find gender differences in the provision or receipt of emotional support (Cohan, Booth, & Granger, 2003; Holtzworth-Munroe, Stuart, Sandin, Smultzler, & McLaughlin, 1997; Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997). However, these studies only assess a brief support interaction within a laboratory study.

Verhofstadt and colleagues (2007) measured both received and perceived emotional support in a sample of Belgian married couples. These researchers created a self-report scale based on the SSICS (Pasch, Harris, Sullivan, & Bradbury, 2004) which asked participants to reflect on the discussions that they have with their partner about personal problems and rate the likelihood that each specific support behavior would occur during the interaction. The behaviors assessed loaded onto subscales that matched Pasch and colleagues (2004) SSICS codes (those

typically used in observational studies). Results revealed significant gender differences with women indicating that they would be more likely to provide emotional support to their spouse during these interactions than men. However, when the same participants were asked to complete a measure of perceived support, indicating the extent to which they felt they could turn to their partner for support, no gender differences were found. Again, when support was assessed using an objective measure, in this case indicating the likelihood of the occurrence of specific support behaviors, gender differences were found in emotional support provision favoring women. However, when these same participants were given a subjective measure of their spouse's level of support, these gender differences disappeared.

Given these conflicting findings within the same samples of participants, it seems plausible that participants are utilizing different information when assessing their partners' level of support depending on the way in which the question is asked. It may be that individuals are evaluating their partners based upon different standards for what they feel is appropriate, or even normal, in terms of the level of emotional support that is provided by men and women.

## **1.2 THE SHIFTING STANDARDS MODEL**

The shifting standards model was originally developed by Biernat, Manis, and Nelson (1991) in order to evaluate the influence of type of response scale on individuals' judgments of stereotyped characteristics. Specifically the authors proposed that, while objective rating scales are likely to reveal expected stereotypical differences in ratings, subjective scales may mask or even reverse these effects. In order to test this theory, the researchers began with a characteristic that relates

to a gender stereotype that is grounded in reality, that of the height of men and women. Men are believed to be taller on average than women. The researchers sought to test if participants would indeed rate men as taller than women (even when they were actually comparable in height), and if this gender difference would vary as a result of the type of rating scale used. Undergraduate participants observed full length pictures of men and women who were matched for height. Some of the participants were asked to estimate the height of the person in the photograph using an objective scale of measurement, feet and inches. Other participants were asked to rate how tall the target was as compared with the average person using a subjective scale ranging from 1 for “very short” to 7 for “very tall”. Still others were given this same subjective rating scale, but instead asked to rate how tall the target was as compared with an average person of the same gender, e.g. “How tall is this man as compared to the average man?” (Biernat, et al., 1991).

The results of this experiment revealed what the researchers termed the shifting standards effect. When participants were asked to judge the targets using an objective scale (feet and inches), results revealed the expected stereotypical gender difference with male targets being rated as significantly taller than female targets. However, there was also a significant interaction between gender of the target and type of response scale used; such that, when participants were asked to compare the target with the average person using a subjective scale, there was an 80% reduction in the gender difference between men and women (although, men were still rated as significantly taller than women). When participants were asked to use this same subjective scale to compare the model to the average individual of the same gender, there was no significant gender difference between ratings for men and women. In other words, in this condition, men and women were rated as being equivalent in height (Biernat, et al., 1991).

In a follow-up study, Biernat and colleagues (1991) found similar results when participants were asked to estimate the weight and financial status of men and women pictured in photographs. Consistent with stereotypes, men were rated as weighing more and making more money than women when participants used objective scales (weight in pounds and financial status in dollars earned per year). However, when participants were asked to use a subjective scale to rate these characteristics as compared to the average adult, the gender difference in weight was substantially reduced and the gender difference in financial status was actually reversed, with women being rated as more “financially successful” than men (Biernat, et al., 1991).

Clearly these studies reveal the importance of type of response scale to the evaluation of stereotyped characteristics, but why would response scale type influence individuals’ ratings of these characteristics? According to Biernat (2003), these results were found because individuals make subjective judgments with reference to within-category standards; this means that ratings will vary based upon the referent that is being used. What is considered “tall” for a woman is not the same as what is considered “tall” for a man. Objective scales, such as standard units of measurement, standardized test scores, or rank orderings, are externally anchored in a shared reality and therefore are able to maintain the same meaning across targets. Estimating the height of an individual as 5’6” is the same for a man and a woman. Subjective scales, on the other hand, are more slippery rating systems in which the units of measurement have no ties to an external, shared reality. These scales, such as likert-type ratings of traits or semantic differentials, can mean different things to different people and often depend on the group (gender, race, etc.) to which the target belongs (Biernat, 2003). For example, a woman judged

to be 5'6" may be deemed as "average" while a man of the same height would be considered "short".

The theory that perceptions vary based on the referent is not a new one. Festinger (1954) proposed in his social comparison theory that humans have a natural tendency to evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves with others. Moreover, he postulated that individuals choose to compare themselves with similar others, particularly if it is an ability at which one group is expected to excel as compared with another group (Festinger, 1954). Zanna, Goethals, and Hill (1975) found evidence supporting this similarity hypothesis in an experiment involving male and female undergraduates at Princeton. The participants were all asked to complete the same Miller Analogies subtest, but researchers manipulated the instructions for the test leading some participants to believe that men tended to perform better on the test than women and others to believe that women typically outperformed men. After completion of the test, participants were given a fictitious score and told that they could also see normative data obtained from groups of either male or female students. When asked to indicate which normative data they would like to view, 97% of participants chose to see the data for others of their same gender. Thus, students were more interested in how they compared with those of their own gender than those of the other gender. While this effect was demonstrated when individuals were evaluating their own abilities, it is also likely to occur when they are asked to evaluate the abilities of others. This is particularly true for abilities in which one gender is expected to excel over another. As Festinger (1954) stated, "If some other person's ability is too far from his own, either above or below, it is not possible to evaluate his own ability accurately by comparison with this other person." (p.120). The same holds true for the abilities of others. Just as I would not evaluate my two year old son's motor abilities by comparing him with the four year olds at

the playground, individuals are likely to use comparisons with others of the same gender in order to evaluate the abilities of a man or woman for a stereotypically masculine or feminine task.

There is also evidence that individuals will evaluate themselves differently on a stereotypic trait dimension when comparing themselves with those of the same gender or those of the other gender. Guimond and colleagues (2006) asked female French high school and university students to rate themselves on various traits describing either relational (feminine) or agentic (masculine) characteristics. Participants were asked to compare themselves with either other women or other men using the same likert-type scale indicating the extent to which each trait was descriptive of them. Results confirmed the hypothesis demonstrating that women rated relational traits as being more descriptive of themselves when they were asked to compare themselves with men than when they were asked to compare themselves with women (Guimond, Chatard, Martinot, Crisp, & Redersdorff, 2006). This is similar to Biernat and colleagues (1991) finding that men were rated as shorter and women as taller when participants were asked to compare targets with those of the same gender as opposed to the average adult. The endpoints of subjective scales seem to shift depending on the referent. It is interesting to note that, even when asked to compare targets with the average adult, Biernat and colleagues (1991) found that having participants use a subjective scale greatly reduced gender differences for height and weight and reversed gender differences for financial success as compared with the gender differences found in objective ratings. These results indicate that, consistent with Festingers's (1954) similarity hypothesis, participants seemed to be automatically comparing the targets with others of the same gender even when they were not specifically instructed to do so.

Because of the shifting nature of subjective scales, objective scales may reflect stereotypical differences between group members, while subjective scales reveal no significant

differences, or even reversals of these differences. These null effects do not necessarily mean that a gender difference does not exist or that stereotypes are not at play, rather they indicate a dual effect of stereotypes (Biernat, 2003). The most commonly identified effects of stereotypes are those of assimilation (Kunda & Thagard, 1996). These effects occur when a group member is perceived to match or assimilate to a certain group stereotype. For example, because of the stereotype that blacks are more aggressive than whites, ambiguously aggressive actions have been shown to be interpreted as more hostile when performed by black targets than when performed by white targets (Sagar & Schofield, 1980). However, along with the assimilative effects of stereotypes, contrast effects may also occur (Biernat, 2003). These effects cause individuals of a stereotyped group to stand out against the stereotype if their actions or traits slightly contradict expectations. For example, because women stereotypically earn less than men, a woman may be rated as more financially successful than a man even if she earns less than him. Although, these two effects of stereotypes seem contradictory, they can both be revealed depending on the type of rating scale being used. Objective scales, which leave little room for individual interpretation, reveal the assimilative effects of stereotypes. While subjective scales, because their units of measurement are adjusted within-category, capture the contrastive effects by influencing the standards that are set for members of a stereotyped group (Biernat, 2003). It is important to note that ratings completed using an objective scale do not necessarily reflect reality or the absolute truth. These ratings are subject to bias by stereotypes just as the subjective ratings are. For example, Biernat and colleagues (1991) found that male targets were rated as taller on average than female targets even though, in reality, the male and female targets had been carefully matched on height. Therefore, it isn't that objective scales measure the truth and

subjective reflect a bias by stereotypes; rather, it is theorized that objective measures capture the assimilative effect of stereotypes while subjective measures capture the contrast effect.

In order to describe these dual effects of stereotype activation, it is helpful to look at another example of the shifting standards model, one in which the stereotype favors women. Women are stereotypically perceived to be superior to men in verbal ability (Hyde, 2005). Based upon this stereotype, Biernat and Manis (1994) predicted that objective rating scales of verbal ability would reflect the assimilative effects of stereotypes by revealing that female targets are rated as being higher in verbal ability than male targets. However, subjective scales would capture the contrastive effects of stereotypes by either nullifying or reversing this gender difference. In order to test this hypothesis, the researchers provided undergraduate participants with a series of definitions of words that had supposedly been written by either a man or a woman. These definitions were carefully matched for quality by the researchers, so that male and female definitions reflected the same level of verbal ability. Half of the participants were asked to rate the verbal ability of the male and female targets using an objective scale (assigning a letter grade from A through E). The other half were given a 5-point likert-type subjective scale ranging from “very low verbal ability” to “very high verbal ability” with which to rate the verbal ability of the targets (Biernat & Manis, 1994).

Results supported the researchers’ prediction of a significant interaction between response scale type and gender of the target. When participants used an objective scale to rate the verbal ability of the targets, women were rated as being higher in verbal ability than men. However, participants who were given the subjective scale rated male and female targets as being comparable in verbal ability (Biernat & Manis, 1994). Thus, even though the definitions had been matched to display the same level of verbal ability for male and female targets,

participants relied upon their stereotype of women's superior verbal ability and rated female targets as being consistent with this stereotype when using an objective scale, revealing the assimilative effect of stereotypes. When participants were asked to use a subjective scale to evaluate the targets, they once again relied upon their stereotypes, but this time the contrastive effects of stereotypes influenced the participants' perceptions of the endpoints of the subjective scale, such that women were held to higher standards than men. In this way what would be considered an "A" for a woman would be comparable to what may have been considered to be a "B" for a man. The important point to note in these results is that just because there was no gender difference revealed in the subjective ratings of verbal ability, participants' ratings were still influenced by their stereotypes. The stereotype simply influenced ratings in a different way on the subjective scale (contrastive effects) than the objective scale (assimilative effects).

When applied to a real-world situation, the contrastive effects of stereotypes mean that members of a negatively stereotyped group may be held to lower standards than those of a positively stereotyped group (Biernat, 2003). However, this also means that negatively stereotyped individuals will have to work twice as hard as their positively stereotyped counterparts in order to convince others of their ability (Biernat, 2003). This effect has been displayed in a study by Biernat and Kobrynowicz (1997) in which undergraduate participants were asked to evaluate the resumes of fictional male or female applicants for a job. All participants received identical job descriptions and resumes to evaluate, except that the name of the applicant was either male or female. Participants were instructed to list the number of pertinent job skills demonstrated by each applicant. Half of the participants were then asked to indicate whether or not the applicant met the minimum standards necessary to be successful at the job. The other half was asked whether or not they felt that the applicant had the ability to be

successful at the job. Consistent with gender stereotypes, participants were more likely to indicate that the male applicants had the ability to succeed at the job than female applicants; however, participants required evidence of a lower number of pertinent job skills in order to indicate that women met the minimum standards necessary to succeed at the job than men (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). In other words, it was easier for female applicants to meet the minimum standards for the job than male applicants, but more difficult for them to prove that they had the ability to succeed at the job. When applied to an actual hiring scenario, Biernat and Fuegen (2001) found evidence that female applicants would be more likely to make a “short list” of potential job candidates than men, but that it would be more difficult for these female applicants to actually be hired for the position as compared with male candidates.

This final study gives an indication of the potential behavioral effects of shifting standards; namely, that some behaviors may reflect the contrastive effects of stereotypes whereas others reveal the assimilative effects. Specifically, Biernat (2003) postulates that zero-sum behaviors, those that involve some kind of decision to be made such as who will be promoted or hired, will favor individuals for which there is a positive stereotype; whereas, nonzero-sum behaviors which can be bestowed on any number of individuals such as praising an employee will favor devalued group members. In this way nonzero-sum behaviors reflect the contrast effect of stereotypes. The positive behaviors reflect surprise on the part of the observer that the target succeeded when s/he was expected to fail. However, zero-sum behaviors reveal the assimilative effects of stereotypes. When a decision must be made it will favor the individual who is stereotypically considered to be higher in the relevant trait or ability. For example, I am often struck by how much praise (a nonzero-sum behavior) I receive from friends and family members on my parallel parking skills (a skill that is stereotypically seen as being masculine).

I've never noticed my husband receiving such praise when he is able to successfully parallel park the car. However, if pressed to choose a driver to park on a crowded downtown street (a zero-sum behavior), I have no doubt that these same friends and family who have praised my skills would choose my husband to park the car.

The behavioral consequences of shifting standards were evaluated in an experiment in which undergraduate participants were asked to imagine themselves as managers of a softball team (Biernat & Vescio, 2002). Participants were given pictures of white men and women, who had been carefully matched for athletic appearance, and asked to choose players, assign positions, and determine a batting order for a hypothetical softball team. All of these behaviors would be classified as zero-sum behaviors. Results revealed that participants chose more men than women to be on the team, were more likely to choose to bench women than men, assigned more men to infield positions (more prestigious positions than outfield) than women, and were more likely to give men the most important positions in the batting order than women. However, when asked how they would react if each player hit a single (a nonzero-sum behavior), participants indicated that they would react more favorably when it was a female player who hit the single than when it was a male player (Biernat & Vescio, 2002). These participants were reacting much in the way that my friends and family react to my successful parallel parking, because they held women to lower standards than men in terms of their athletic ability, they are more surprised by success in this realm when it is attained by a female player than a male player.

While it is likely that this shifting standards effect is automatic, there is evidence to indicate that personal goals may motivate and attenuate the effect. Miron, Branscombe, and Biernat (2010) evaluated the effect of group identification on the setting of standards of injustice

in a sample of undergraduate participants. Participants were given a series of items and asked to indicate for each item how much harm had been caused to Africans by Americans during slavery. They were then asked, using the same items, how much harm would need to have been done to Africans in order to consider the United States a racist nation. Participants then completed a group identification measure indicating how much they identified with other Americans (Miron, et al., 2010). As predicted, the researchers found that high group identifiers set higher standards of injustice than low identifiers which led to more lenient judgments of the amount of harm done to Africans by Americans. The same results were found when the researchers manipulated group identification by asking participants to either write an essay about how they felt similar or dissimilar to other Americans. Those who wrote about how they were similar to other Americans set higher standards of injustice than those who wrote about how they were dissimilar (Miron, et al., 2010). Thus, those who had the most to lose by evaluating America as a racist nation set their standards of injustice such that America would not be judged as racist. These results indicate that standards may be set in order to maintain personal beliefs. Given that individuals are motivated to think the best of their romantic partner (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), it is likely that, given the opportunity, they will shift their standards in order to see their partner in the best possible light.

### **1.3 HYPOTHESES**

It was predicted that a shifting standards effect would occur when participants evaluated their partners' provision of emotional support. Specifically it was predicted that there would be a

significant interaction between gender of the target and type of response scale. Given the stereotype that women are more emotionally supportive in their relationships than men, it was predicted that objective ratings of a partner's emotional support would reveal significant gender differences with women being rated as providing more emotional support to their partners than men. However, subjective ratings of a partner's emotional support would reveal no gender differences in the amount of emotional support provided by the partner.

It was theorized that this effect would occur because, when using the subjective scale, individuals will rate their partner's emotional support adequacy as compared with others of the same gender as their partner. In other words, women will compare their partners' provision of emotional support with what they consider to be typical of the average man; while men will rate their partners' emotional support skill with that of what they consider to be typical of the average woman. Therefore, it was predicted that the degree to which participants indicated that their partner was similar to others of the same gender, in terms of emotional support provision, would correlate more highly with subjective ratings of that partner's emotional support skill than the degree to which they were rated as being similar to those of the other gender. In other words, how a woman rates her partner as comparing with other men in terms of emotional support skill will be more highly correlated with her subjective rating of his skill than how she rates her partner as comparing with other women. This finding would support the theory that the shifting standards effect occurs because individuals use within-category standards to evaluate others when using a subjective rating scale; a theory that had not been previously tested.

Finally, stereotype adherence is predicted to relate to objective ratings and subjective ratings of emotional support provision in opposing ways. Since the stereotype that women provide more emotional support to their partners than men is a positive stereotype of women and

relates to the idea that women are gentle, nurturing creatures who should be admired and who should take care of their man, it was predicted that ratings of benevolent sexism (BS) and benevolence towards men (BM) would be particularly related to measures of emotional support provision. First, since it was predicted that the objective ratings of emotional support provision would reflect the assimilative effects of gender stereotypes, it was predicted that men who rate high in BS will rate their female partners, using an objective scale, as providing more emotional support than men who rate low in BS. For example, men who believe that women are typically very nurturing and caring individuals should be more likely to rate their female partners as fitting with this stereotype and providing them with a good deal of emotional support than men who don't necessarily hold this stereotype about women. The opposite would be the case for women. Women who rate high in BM will rate their male partners, using an objective scale, as providing less emotional support than women who rate low in BM. According to the BM scale, it is a woman's responsibility to provide for her man's emotional needs; therefore, women who adhere to this traditional stereotype should report their male partners as providing less emotional support to them than women who do not believe in this stereotype.

The subjective scale, which was predicted to reflect the contrast effects of stereotypes, should display the opposite pattern from the objective scale ratings. Men who rate high in BS and use a subjective scale to rate their female partners' emotional support provision, will rate their partners as providing less emotional support than men who rate low in BS. In the case of the subjective scale, it is believed that men will be implicitly comparing their female partner with that of the "typical" woman. Men who feel that women are typically very nurturing and caring may then rate their partner as less emotionally supportive in comparison to these women. For women, those who rate high in BM and use a subjective scale to rate their partners' emotional

support provision, will rate their male partners as providing more emotional support than women who rate low in BM. Women who feel that men are naturally unemotional and need to be taken care of by women, will likely rate their own partner as being more emotionally supportive than the “typical” man. Thus, the overall shifting standards effect, as reflected by the interaction between type of response scale and gender of the target, will be stronger for individuals who rate high in BS and BM than for those who rate low in these attitudes.

One individual difference variable that may be related to ratings of a partner’s provision of emotional support is optimism. Optimists generally expect positive future outcomes; whereas, pessimists expect the worst (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). Optimists also differ from pessimists in their coping strategies (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) and may therefore differ in the support they need and elicit from others. Relationship satisfaction has also been shown to be highly correlated with ratings of partners’ provision of emotional support (Acitelli, 1996). This may be because individuals in satisfying relationships view their partners in a more positive light and/or because individuals are more satisfied with a partner who provides good emotional support than one who does not. For these reasons, optimism and relationship satisfaction were measured and controlled for in analyses predicting emotional support scores.

In summary, it was predicted that: 1. There would be a significant interaction between gender of the target and type of response scale, such that women will be rated as providing more emotional support than men on the objective scale but no gender differences will be found on the subjective scale. 2. Individuals’ ratings of their partners in comparison with others of the same gender will correlate more highly with subjective ratings of their partners’ emotional support skills than ratings of their partners in comparison with those of the other gender. 3. Men high in BS who use an objective scale to rate their partners’ provision of emotional support will rate

their partner as providing more emotional support than men who rate low in BS. For women, the opposite will be true for the objective ratings of emotional support. Women high in BM will rate their partners as providing less emotional support than women low in BM. 4. Men high in BS who use a subjective scale to rate their partners' provision of emotional support will rate their partners as providing less emotional support than men low in BS. Again, the opposite will be true for women using subjective ratings of emotional support. Those high in BM will rate their partners as providing more emotional support than those low in BM. 5. The interaction between gender of the target and response scale type will be stronger for individuals high in BS and BM than for those low in BS and BM.

## **2.0 METHOD**

### **2.1 PARTICIPANTS**

Three hundred forty-one undergraduates participated in the study. Two participants were excluded because they were involved in homosexual relationships, three were excluded because they were married, 12 were excluded because they described their last problem discussed with their partner as being a conflict discussion, and 44 participants were excluded because they hadn't discussed a problem with their partner in over a week. This left a final sample of 280 (127 men and 153 women) participants.

Participants were Introduction to Psychology students recruited through the University subject pool. They received one hour of research credit towards their research requirement for their participation. A majority of participants were between the ages of 18 and 20 years old (92.5%), White (88.9%), and had at least one parent with a college degree (73.9%). Most of the participants had been involved in their current relationship for less than two years (75.7%), and most relationships were described by the participants as exclusive (89.6%) and not involving cohabitation (94.6%). Most participants described the last personal problem they had discussed with their partner as involving school work (68.6%)

## 2.2 DESIGN & PROCEDURE

The study was a 2 (gender of target) X 2 (response scale type) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to complete a survey with the following measures in groups of two to 20 (see Appendix A for the complete survey). Participants were asked to think back to the last time they discussed a personal problem with their partner. They were told that this problem should not be one that involved their partner. These instructions were designed to get participants to think about support interactions with their partners as opposed to conflict interactions. Individuals who described a conflict interaction and those who had not discussed a problem with their partner in over a week were excluded from final analyses. Participants were assigned to alternating conditions as they entered the study. In the objective condition (60 men and 77 women), participants were asked to rate their partners' emotional support behavior during their most recent support interaction using an objective measure (described below). In the subjective condition (67 men and 76 women), participants were asked to give a similar rating of their partners' emotional support behaviors using a subjective scale (described below). When participants had completed the survey, they were debriefed on the true purpose of the study and given the opportunity to ask questions about the study (see Appendix B for the complete debriefing script).

## 2.3 MEASURES

### 2.3.1 Objective measure of partner's emotional support ( $\alpha=.89$ )

Participants in the objective condition completed an adaptation of the emotional/esteem support portion of the Support in Intimate Relationships Rating Scale (SIRRS; Dehle et al., 2001). This scale was developed in order to measure support adequacy in married college students' relationships. The original measure consists of a series of specific support behaviors and asks participants to indicate first how often their partner performed those behaviors that day (actual), and next how often the participant would have liked their partner to perform that behavior that day (preferred). The support adequacy score is calculated by subtracting the preferred number of support behaviors from the actual number of support behaviors.

Although the SIRRS was originally developed and validated using married couples, a recent factor analysis of the scale revealed a reliable four factor structure of support types in both dating and married college student samples (Barry, Bunde, Brock, & Lawrence, 2009). The four support types measured by the SIRRS were defined as esteem/emotional, physical comfort, informational and tangible support types. Each subscale demonstrated good internal consistency (alphas ranged from .86-.92; Barry et al., 2009). Because the purpose of the current study was to determine the shifting standards effect for evaluations of emotional support, the scale was modified to include only the eight items that loaded strongly (as indicated by a factor loading of .60 or above) on the emotional/esteem support factor in previous research (Barry, et al., 2009).

The SIRRS was also modified to be appropriate for a one-time completion, as opposed to the daily completion procedure used by the original authors, and to measure only the "actual"

amount of emotional support provided by the partner. Participants were asked to think about the interactions that they had with their partners during discussions of a specific personal problem and indicate how many times their partners performed each of the specific emotional support behaviors. The mean of these numbers indicated the partner's objective emotional support (ES) score. The SIRRS was chosen to measure participants' objective evaluations of their partners' emotional support because it yields an emotional support score that is grounded in a shared, external reality. For example objective ES score of three means the same thing for all participants, namely that the partner performed the emotional support behaviors an average of three times during support interactions.

### **2.3.2 Subjective measure of partner's emotional support (.78)**

Participants in the subjective condition completed a measure using the same emotional support behaviors used in the objective measure of emotional support, but were asked to respond to each item using a subjective scale (See Appendix section A.1 for the complete measure). Similar to the objective condition, participants were asked to think about the interactions that they had with their partners during discussions of a specific personal problem. However, rather than indicating the exact number of times the partner engaged in each support behavior, participants were asked to use a 5-point likert type scale ranging from "Not at all" to "A good deal" in order to indicate how much their partner performed each behavior.

This measure was constructed in order to measure the exact same behaviors as the objective scale but to do so in a subjective way. The likert type scale gives participants the opportunity to apply their own, personal standards (which may differ for male and female

partners) rather than adhering to a shared, external reality. Participants' subjective emotional support (ES) score was calculated as the average of their responses to all eight of the support behaviors.

### **2.3.3 Social comparison items**

After completion of the objective or subjective measures of emotional support, participants were asked to respond to three items designed to measure how much emotional support participants feel their partner provides to them as compared with those of the same gender, those of the other gender, and people in general. Participants were instructed to think about other couples in their age range and compare the men and women in these couples with their own partner in terms of amount of emotional support provided to them. For example, women were asked first, "How much emotional support did your partner provide to you compared with how much you think most *men* in these other couples provide to their partners?" next, "How much emotional support did your partner provide to you compared with how much you think most *women* in these other couples provide to their partners?" and finally, "How much emotional support did your partner provide to you compared with how much you think most people in general provide to their partners?" Participants were asked to respond to each of these items on a 5-point, likert type scale ranging from "much less than most men/women" to "much more than most men/women".

#### **2.3.4 Relationship satisfaction ( $\alpha=.84$ )**

General relationship satisfaction was measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). This 7-item Likert scale is a brief measure of individuals' overall satisfaction with their relationships. Participants were asked to respond to each item using a 5-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" to indicate how much the statement described their current partner and relationship. Previous research with undergraduate couples has revealed this scale to have good internal reliability; strong correlations with measures of love, commitment, and investment in a relationship; and the ability to predict relationship dissolution over the course of a semester with the same level of accuracy as other, longer measures of relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, 1988).

This measure was chosen because it is less time consuming than other, longer measures of relationship satisfaction yet still maintains strong psychometric properties. Relationship satisfaction was measured for descriptive purposes and to insure that it did not vary systematically by experimental condition or gender. Participants' relationship satisfaction scores were calculated as the mean of their responses to all of the items.

#### **2.3.5 Adherence to gender stereotypes**

The extent to which participants adhere to gender stereotypes about women will be measured using the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996). This 22-item scale asks participants to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement concerning men and women using a 6-item Likert scale with no midpoint (participants are forced to choose

to either agree or disagree with each item). The scale is divided into two subscales measuring hostile sexism (HS;  $\alpha=.81$ ) and benevolent sexism (BS;  $\alpha=.77$ ). HS is defined as agreement with negative stereotypes about women, e.g. “Women are too easily offended.”, and hostility towards women, e.g. “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.” BS is defined as holding a positive attitude towards women that nevertheless serves to belittle women and keep them subordinate to men. Individuals who hold a benevolently sexist attitude believe that women should be cherished and admired by men, e.g. “A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.” At the same time this attitude promotes the idea that women need to be protected and taken care of by men, e.g. “Women should be cherished and protected by men.” Both subscales have demonstrated strong positive correlations with other measures of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This measure of sexism was chosen because it is unique in its measurement of BS. This form of sexism was predicted to be particularly related to the shifting standards that individuals apply to men and women in terms of emotional support provision. The belief that women are more nurturing and supportive of their partners than men is likely to be related to benevolently sexist beliefs that women are in some way morally superior to men and should be cherished for their positive qualities.

The extent to which participants adhere to gender stereotypes about men was measured using the Ambivalence Toward Men Inventory (AMI; Glick & Fiske, 1999). Similar to the ASI, this 20-item scale asks participants to indicate their agreement and disagreement with each item designed to measure either hostility towards men (HM;  $\alpha=.70$ ) or benevolence towards men (BM;  $\alpha=.81$ ). HM is defined as adherence to negative stereotypes about men, e.g. “A man who is sexually attracted to a woman typically has no morals about doing whatever it takes to get her in bed.”, and resentment towards male dominance, e.g. “Men will always fight to have greater

control in society than women.” BM describes the attitude that women are incomplete without men, e.g. “Every woman needs a male partner who will cherish her.”, and that women should nurture and take care of men in the home, e.g. “Even if both members of a couple work, the woman ought to be more attentive to taking care of her man at home.” These scales have demonstrated strong positive correlations with other measures of attitudes toward men and women (Glick & Fiske, 1999). Again, this scale was chosen primarily because of its inclusion of a measure of BM. The attitude that women should nurture and care for their male partner in the home is likely to be related to the standards that individuals apply to men and women in terms of the level of emotional support that is expected of them.

It should be noted that for the purposes of the current study, the Likert scales for both the ASI and AMI were altered slightly to have only four points rather than six, as in the original scales. This was done in order to accommodate the number of options available using the scantron system while still maintaining the authors’ intent in not including a midpoint for the scale. Scores were calculated separately for each subscale as the mean of the items contained in that subscale.

### **2.3.6 Optimisim ( $\alpha=.78$ )**

Optimism was measured using the Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier et al., 1994). The LOT consists of 6 items (as well as four filler items) designed to measure participants’ dispositional optimism. Participants were instructed to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Instructions informed participants that there were no right or wrong answers and urged them not

to let their response to one item influence their responses to other items. Participants' optimism scores were calculated as the mean of their responses to all of the items (not including the filler items).

## 3.0 RESULTS

### 3.1 INITIAL DATA ANALYSES

Chi-Square analyses revealed no significant differences between men and women in terms of relationship length ( $X^2(4, N=280)=3.22, NS$ ), the type of problem discussed with their partners ( $X^2(4, N=280)=6.99, NS$ ), The last time they discussed the problem with their partners ( $X^2(3, N=280)=6.29, NS$ ), their age ( $X^2(3, N=280)=4.61, NS$ ), ethnicity ( $X^2(4, N=280)=5.85, NS$ ), or parent's highest level of education ( $X^2(4, N=280)=3.29, NS$ ). Analyses also revealed no systematic differences by condition (objective vs. subjective) for these same demographics: relationship length ( $X^2(4, N=280)=1.08, NS$ ), type of problem ( $X^2(4, N=280)=4.24, NS$ ), last time the problem was discussed ( $X^2(3, N=280)=.80, NS$ ), age ( $X^2(3, N=280)=.79, NS$ ), ethnicity ( $X^2(4, N=280)=3.29, NS$ ), and parent's highest level of education ( $X^2(4, N=280)=.557, NS$ ).

Observation of the distribution of objective ES scores revealed a strong positive skew due to a few outliers at the high end of the scale. For this reason objective ES scores were truncated and all scores above seven were re-coded to seven. This re-coding only altered five scores and resulted in a more normal distribution. The distribution of the subjective ES scores was not strongly skewed.

### 3.2 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

A 2 (gender) X 2 (condition) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine possible differences between men and women or between subjects in the objective vs. subjective conditions. The overall multivariate F for gender was significant,  $F(8, 267) = 8.88, p < .001$ . Univariate effects and means and standard deviations for all scale scores are presented in Table 1 by gender. As shown in Table 1, men and women did not differ significantly in their levels of relationship satisfaction. Men rated themselves significantly higher than women in optimism, Benevolent Sexism (BS), Hostile Sexism (HS), and Benevolence towards Men (BM). Women scored significantly higher than men in Hostility towards Men (HM). Women also rated their partners as providing significantly more emotional support than men using both the objective and subjective rating scales. The multivariate F for condition was not significant,  $F(8, 267) = 1.25, NS$ . The only significant univariate effect of condition was found for the HM score. Individuals in the objective condition rated slightly higher in this score than those in the subjective condition,  $F(1, 276) = 4.40, p < .05$ .

**Table 1.** Means and Standard Deviations by Gender

Scale (Range)	Men			Women			F (df)	$\eta^2$
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N		
Objective ES (0-7)	1.81	1.22	60	2.36	1.82	77	4.16 (1,135)*	.03
Subjective ES (1-4)	3.21	.57	67	3.40	.54	76	4.10 (1, 141)*	.03
Satisfaction (1-5)	4.12	.58	127	4.23	.61	151	.220 (1,276)	.001
Optimism (1-5)	3.58	.69	127	3.31	.68	151	11.19 (1,276)***	.04
BS score (1-4)	2.65	.43	127	2.46	.50	151	11.17 (1,276)***	.04
HS score (1-4)	2.63	.47	127	2.35	.50	151	22.42 (1,276)***	.08
BM score (1-4)	2.55	.48	127	2.28	.55	151	19.40 (1,276)***	.07
HM score (1-4)	2.05	.41	127	2.17	.44	151	5.8 (1,276)*	.02

Note. Participants completed only the objective or subjective measure of ES depending on their condition, but participants in both conditions completed all other measures. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

### 3.3 TEST OF SHIFTING STANDARDS EFFECT

It was predicted that objective ratings of emotional support provision would reveal a significant gender difference with women being rated as providing more emotional support to their partners than men; while subjective ratings would not reveal any significant gender differences in the provision of emotional support. In order to compare overall emotional support ratings, objective and subjective ES scores were transformed to z-scores and combined into a single variable (ES z-score). This was necessary because the objective and subjective measures of emotional supported used different scales. Gender and condition were assigned dummy codes. Men were

coded as zero (the reference group) and women as one. For condition, the objective condition was coded as zero (the reference group) and the subjective condition as one. The interaction between gender and condition was calculated as the product of these dummy codes. To test the hypothesis, a regression analysis was conducted predicting ES z-scores with participant's gender, condition (objective vs. subjective), and the interaction between the two (gender X condition). There was expected to be a significant interaction between gender and condition such that, for the objective scale male participants would rate their partners as providing more emotional support than female participants while, for the subjective scale, there would be no significant difference between the ratings for men and women.

The regression analysis was conducted initially controlling for several demographic and relationship variables such as age, ethnicity, parent's highest level of education, the type of problem discussed, and the last time the problem was discussed. These variables did not demonstrate a significant association with the dependent variable nor did they influence the effect of the primary independent variables; therefore they were left out of further analyses. Relationship satisfaction, relationship length, and optimism were included in analyses because of their predicted association with ratings of emotional support. These continuous variables were centered before being entered into the regression equation. Results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 2. Model 1 details the results of the analysis without the inclusion of the gender X condition interaction term. Model 2 includes all of the variables in Model 1 with the addition of the interaction term. In this way the contribution of the interaction term to the model can be easily observed.

As shown in Table 2, relationship satisfaction was positively associated with ratings of ES. Relationship length was marginally negatively associated with these ratings. As predicted,

participant's gender was significantly associated with ratings of partners' provision of emotional support, but not in the predicted direction. Contrary to expectations, women rated their partners as providing more emotional support to them than men. Also contrary to expectations, the interaction between gender and condition was not significant; indicating that the association between ratings of emotional support provision and gender did not differ by condition.

**Table 2. Gender and condition as predictors of ES z-scores**

Variable	ES z-scores			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	B (SE)	t (278)	B (SE)	t (278)
Constant	-.18 (.10)	-1.79	-.2 (.12)	-1.65
Satisfaction	.55 (.10)	5.70***	.55 (.1)	5.70***
Relationship length	-.09 (.05)	-1.94*	-.09 (.05)	-1.93
Optimism	.04 (.08)	.48	.04 (.08)	.48
Gender	.34 (.11)	2.94**	.37 (.16)	2.24*
Condition	-.01 (.11)	-.09	.02 (.16)	.12
Gender X condition			-.06 (.23)	-.25
R <sup>2</sup>	.14		.14	
F (df)	8.98 (5, 271)***		7.47 (6, 270)***	

Note. N=280. \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

### 3.4 TEST OF INFLUENCE OF STEREOTYPE ADHERENCE

It was predicted that stereotype adherence would be associated with ratings of emotional support provision and that this association would differ depending on the gender of the participant and the condition to which they were assigned (objective vs. subjective). First, as adherence to benevolently sexist beliefs about women increased, male participants, who rated their partner using an objective scale, were predicted to rate their partners as providing an increasing amount of emotional support. For women, as benevolence towards men increased, female participants, who rated their partner using an objective scale, were predicted to rate their male partners as providing an increasing amount of emotional support. The opposite was predicted for subjective ratings of emotional support. For men, benevolently sexist attitudes were expected to be negatively associated with subjective ratings of emotional support provision; while for women benevolence towards men was expected to be positively associated with subjective ratings of emotional support. Therefore, within each gender there was expected to be an interaction between benevolence scores and condition, such that benevolence scores would have an opposing effect for objective vs. subjective conditions.

In order to test these hypotheses, regression analyses were conducted separately for men and women predicting ES z-scores with BS scores for men and BM scores for women along with the interaction between the respective benevolence score and condition. In order to reduce nonessential collinearity the BS and BM scores were centered. The interaction term was calculated as the product of the appropriate centered BS or BM score and the dummy code for condition. Although no specific predictions were made regarding the influence of hostile

attitudes towards men and women, HS and HM scores were also included in the analyses since they have been shown to be highly correlated with BS and BM scores.

Results of the regressions are presented in Table 3 and Table 4. In both tables, Model 1 demonstrates results of the analysis without including the relevant benevolent attitude scale X condition interaction. Model 2 includes this interaction term. As shown in Model 1 in Table 3, for men BS scores were significantly associated with ratings of partners' provision of emotional support. However, the non-significance of the BS X condition interaction term indicates that the association between BS and ES ratings did not differ significantly by condition, as was predicted. Therefore, for men in both the objective and subjective conditions, higher BS scores were associated with higher ratings of emotional support provision.

As shown in Table 4, for women BM scores were significantly associated with ratings of partners' provision of emotional support. However, again contrary to predictions, the interaction between condition and BM scores was not significant, indicating that BM scores had a similar association with ES scores for both objective and subjective conditions. For women in both conditions, higher BM scores were associated with higher ratings of provision of emotional support.

**Table 3.** BS scores and condition as predictors of ES z-scores for men

Variable	ES z-scores			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	B (SE)	t (125)	B (SE)	t (125)
Constant	-.29 (.12)	-2.5*	-.27 (.12)	-2.28*
Satisfaction	.38 (.14)	2.68**	.39 (.14)	2.73**
Relationship length	-.11 (.1)	-1.68	-.13 (.1)	-1.87
Optimism	-.03 (.11)	-.27	-.04 (.11)	-.34
HS score	.23 (.17)	1.35	.22 (.17)	1.27
BS score	.54 (.18)	3.02**	.37 (.25)	1.46
Condition	.03 (.15)	.2	-.01 (.16)	-.04
BS score X condition			.35 (.37)	.96
R <sup>2</sup>	.15		.16	
F (df)	3.58 (6,120)**		3.2 (7, 119)**	

Note. N=127. \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

**Table 4.** BM scores and condition as predictors of ES z-scores for women

Variable	ES z-scores			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	B (SE)	t (151)	B (SE)	t (151)
Constant	.22 (.12)	1.91	.25 (.12)	2.06*
Satisfaction	.62 (.14)	4.48***	.62 (.14)	4.44***
Relationship length	-.08 (.07)	-1.24	-.08 (.07)	-1.12
Optimism	.03 (.12)	.21	.03 (.12)	.22
HM score	-.3 (.22)	-1.41	-.31 (.22)	-1.44
BM score	.32 (.16)	1.93*	.44 (.22)	2.02*
Condition	-.04 (.16)	-.24	-.07 (.17)	-.41
BM score X condition			-.25 (.29)	-.85
R <sup>2</sup>	.19		.19	
F (df)	5.59 (6,143)***		4.89 (7,142)***	

Note. N=153. \*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.001

### **3.5 TEST OF THE INFLUENCE OF STEREOTYPE ADHERENCE ON THE SHIFTING STANDARDS EFFECT**

It was predicted that the shifting standards effect would be stronger for participants who rated high in benevolent stereotype adherence than for those who rated low in these attitudes. In order to test this prediction a regression analysis was conducted predicting ratings of emotional support with participants' gender, condition, benevolence scores and the interaction between all three independent variables. It was predicted that a three-way interaction would occur between gender, condition, and level of stereotype adherence such that as stereotype adherence increased, the interaction between gender and condition (the shifting standards effect) would also increase. In other words, the gender difference in objective ratings of emotional support provision would become larger as the stereotype adherence score increased, while the gender difference in subjective ratings would become smaller as stereotype adherence increased.

In order to compare men and women using a common measure of benevolent stereotype adherence, items from the BM and BS scales were combined into an overall measure of adherence to benevolent stereotypes about men and women. This scale demonstrated good internal reliability ( $\alpha=.87$ ) indicating that the items were all measuring a similar concept. This procedure was repeated to form an overall measure of adherence to hostile gender stereotypes. Items from the HM and HS scales were combined to form an overall measure of hostility towards men and women. Again this scale demonstrated adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha=.78$ ). Scores from both of these scales were centered. Interaction terms were calculated as the product of the centered benevolence score and the dummy code for the categorical variable (gender or condition).

Results from the regression analysis are displayed in Table 5. Model 1 displays the results of the analysis without the inclusion of any interaction terms. Model 2 tests for a difference in the association between overall benevolence and ES ratings based on condition. Model 3 tests for a difference in this association by gender and Model 4 tests the predicted three-way interaction between benevolence, gender, and condition. Model 4 also includes the genderXcondition interaction term so that all possible two-way interactions are included in the model before the addition of the three-way interaction term. As shown in Table 5, the predicted three-way interaction between benevolence, gender, and condition was not significant.

**Table 5.** Three-way interaction between gender, condition, and benevolence scores predicting ES z-scores

Variable	ES z-scores			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)
Constant	-.21 (.1)*	-.20 (.1)*	-.24 (.1)*	-.26 (.12)*
Satisfaction	.56 (.1)***	.56 (.1)***	.56 (.1)***	.57 (.1)***
Relationship length	-.09 (.05)	-.08 (.05)	-.08 (.05)	-.08 (.05)
Optimism	.02 (.08)	.02 (.08)	.01 (.08)	.01 (.08)
Hostility	.27 (.18)	.27 (.18)	.25 (.18)	.26 (.18)
Benevolence	.27 (.14)	.32 (.18)	.6 (.25)*	.45 (.17)
Gender	.41 (.12)***	.41 (.12)***	.43 (.12)***	.5 (.16)**
Condition	-.05 (.11)	-.05 (.11)	-.04 (.11)	-.001 (.17)
Benevolence X condition		-.12 (.24)	-.12 (.24)	.18 (.42)
Benevolence X gender			-.41 (.26)	-.16 (.35)
Gender X condition				-.12 (.23)
BenevolenceXgenderXcondition				-.53 (.51)
R <sup>2</sup>	.18	.18	.19	.19
F (df)	8.25(7,269)***	7.23(8,268)***	6.74(9,267)***	5.64(11,265)***

Note. N=280. \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

### 3.6 TEST OF SOCIAL COMPARISON HYPOTHESIS

The shifting standards effect was predicted to occur because participants were predicted to implicitly compare their partners with same gender others (i.e. a male partner would be compared with the typical man) when rating their partners' provision of emotional support using a subjective scale. In order to test this hypothesis, correlations were conducted separately for men and women analyzing the relationship between items measuring within-gender, between-gender, and gender neutral comparisons and subjective ratings of emotional support. It was predicted that the correlation between ratings of emotional support and the within-gender comparison item would be larger than the correlations between these ratings and the between-gender and gender neutral comparison items.

Results of these correlations are presented in Table 6. For men, as predicted, the correlation was stronger between the same-gender comparison item and ratings of emotional support provision than between these ratings and the between-gender comparison item. The correlation between the gender-neutral comparison item and ratings of emotional support was very similar to that of the correlation between the same-gender comparison item and emotional support ratings. In fact, these two items (gender neutral and same-gender comparisons) were highly correlated with one another. For women, contrary to predictions, correlations between subjective ratings and all social comparison items were about the same.

**Table 6.** Correlations between social comparison items and ratings of emotional support

Item	1	2	3	4	M (SD)	N
1. Within-gender	-	.54***	.8***	.47***	3.64 (.96)	126
2. Between-gender	.65***	-	.52***	.21	4.07 (.97)	119
3. Gender neutral	.76***	.7***	-	.52***	3.87 (.92)	126
4. Subjective ES	.55***	.55***	.59***	-	3.21 (.57)	67
M (SD)	3.97 (.84)	2.99 (1.07)	3.74 (.87)	3.4 (.54)	-	
N	153	150	153	76		-

Note. Correlations for male raters are presented above the diagonal, female raters presented below the diagonal; Social comparison items range 1-5; Subjective ES range 1-4; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

In order to evaluate if participants still held the stereotype that women typically provide more emotional support than men, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted examining the mean ratings for the within-gender and between-gender comparison items. Results of this analysis are presented graphically in Figure 3. For the within-gender comparison item, women rated their partners as comparing significantly better with other men than men rated their partners as comparing with other women,  $F(1,277) = 9.41, p < .01$ . For the between gender comparison item, the opposite was the case. Women rated their partners significantly lower than men,  $F(1, 267) = 72.34, p < .001$ . In other words, women felt that on average their partners did not compare as well, in terms of provision of emotional support, with the typical woman as men felt their partners compared with the typical man. As shown in Figure 3, on average women felt that their partners provided about the same amount of emotional support as the typical woman; whereas, men felt that their partners provided much more emotional support than the typical man.

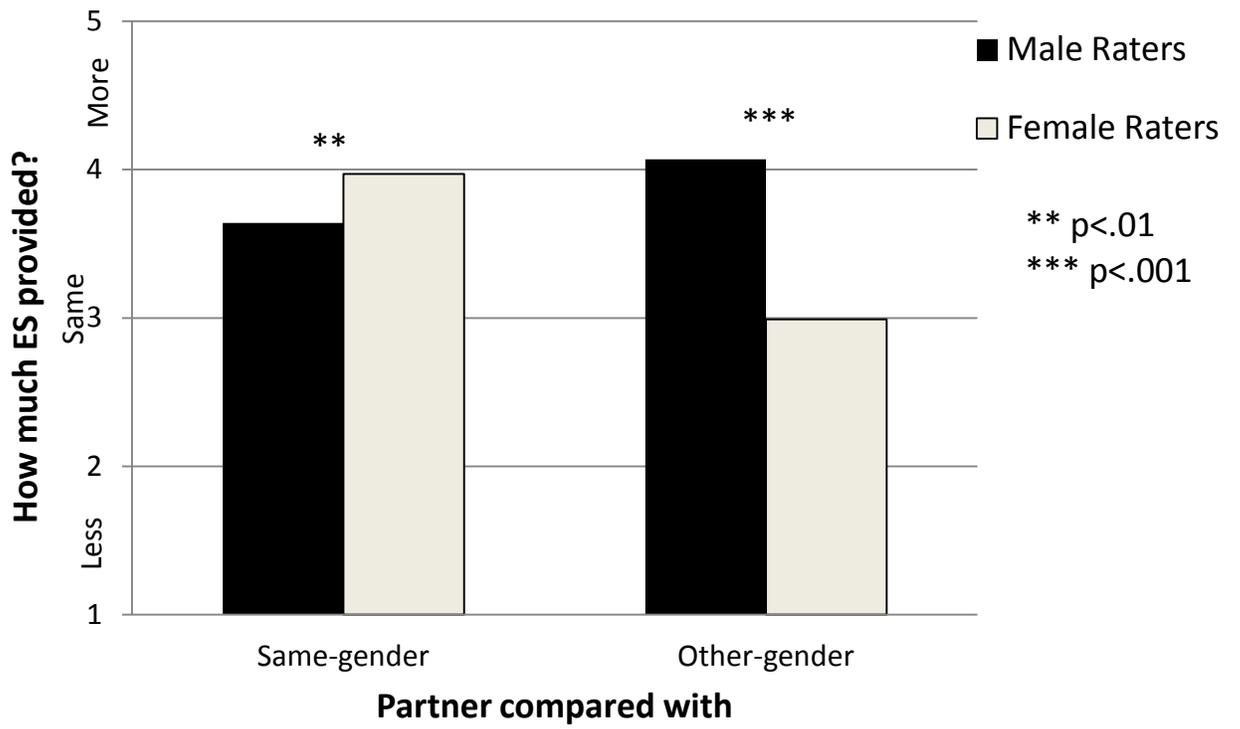


Figure 1. Means for social comparison items by gender

## **4.0 DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 SHIFTING STANDARDS**

It was predicted that women would rate their partners as providing less emotional support than men in the objective condition but, due to the shifting standards effect, this gender difference would disappear in the subjective condition. Results did not support this hypothesis and instead revealed that women rated their partners as providing more emotional support than men in both conditions. These results are surprising given that typically, when gender differences are found in the provision of emotional support, the difference is in the opposite direction with women providing more support than men (see Cutrona, et al., 1997; Depner & Ingersoll-Dayton, 1985; Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986; Verhofstadt, et al., 2007).

There are several explanations for these surprising results. It may be that this reversal of the expected gender difference was actually due to shifting standards; however, the objective condition was not objective enough to capture the assimilative effects of the gender stereotype as predicted. In other words, perhaps both scales were subjective and therefore captured the contrastive effects of the gender stereotype (which was predicted to only occur in the subjective condition). Indeed the objective and subjective scales performed very similarly to one another. It may be that the task of recalling exactly how many times a partner performed specific support behaviors accurately was too difficult for participants and their ratings were therefore subject to

bias and shifting standards in the same way as the subjective scale. Biernat and colleagues (1991) have suggested and found evidence that at times reversals in the stereotypical gender difference can occur when participants are making evaluations using a subjective scale. This was the case in Biernat and colleagues 1991 study in which the researchers found that participants judged male targets as earning more money than female targets when using an objective scale (dollar amounts), but judged female targets as being more financially successful than male targets when using a subjective scale. The attempt to measure emotional support provision in an objective manner using a self-report scale is both what made the current study unique and difficult. It may be that this feat was simply not accomplished. Further research is needed to determine if the gender differences found in the current study are due to a shifting standards effect or require a different explanation.

Another explanation for the surprising finding that men were rated as providing more emotional support to their partners than women relates to the sample used in the current study. This was a very young sample of participants (mostly 18-20 year olds) that were in relatively new relationships (most of them less than 2 years). It may be that young men in this honeymoon period of a relationship are more emotionally supportive than women at this same time. Previous research has found that men at this age tend to fall in love more quickly than women (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) and are more likely to hold romantic beliefs such as a belief in love at first sight (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). Whereas women, on average, take a more cautious, pragmatic approach to love than men (Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990). These differences in the approach to love may manifest themselves in men being more emotionally supportive than women early on in the relationship.

There may also be generational differences between the very young sample analyzed in the current study and the samples (typically married) that have been utilized in the past. There is evidence of generational differences in the amount of other types of support that men provide to their partners. For example, although women continue to do more housework than men on average, this gender difference has decreased since the 1980s with women performing less housework and men performing more than in the past (Coltrane, 2000). There may also be changes in the amount of emotional support that men now provide to their partners. Previous blueprints for romantic relationships emphasized separate roles for men and women (Cancian, 1987). According to this traditional idea of relationships, women were responsible for providing emotional support to their partner, but men were not. Today, both men and women expect their partner to provide them with emotional support. In fact, failure to meet this expectation has been cited as one of the primary reasons for divorce in married couples (Riessman, 1990). It may be that young men are now providing more emotional support to their romantic partners than they have in the past because this behavior is necessary in order to establish and maintain a relationship.

## **4.2 THE INFLUENCE OF STEREOTYPES**

It was predicted that adherence to benevolent gender stereotypes would be associated with ratings of ES, but in different ways depending on condition. First, for men, it was predicted that benevolently sexist attitudes would be positively associated with objective ES ratings but negatively associated with subjective ES ratings. For women, holding benevolent attitudes

towards men was predicted to be negatively associated with objective ES ratings and positively associated with subjective ratings of ES. Results revealed a significant association between benevolent attitudes towards the other-gender and ratings of ES; however, contrary to predictions, this association did not differ significantly by condition. For men and women in both conditions, benevolent attitudes were positively associated with ratings of ES (although this association was not significant for men in the objective condition).

These results reveal a much simpler relationship between benevolent attitudes and ratings of ES than had been predicted. This may be because, along with measuring attitudes that support the stereotype of women as caregivers and men as deserving of women's care, both the benevolent sexism (BS) and benevolence towards men (BM) scales contain items that measure individuals' attitudes about the importance of heterosexual intimacy. This is the belief that men and women are incomplete without a romantic partner of the other-gender. It is not surprising that individuals who endorse this belief would also find their romantic partners to be especially emotionally supportive, either because holding this belief causes them to see more positive attributes in their romantic partner or because having a romantic partner who is emotionally supportive can reinforce the importance of this partner.

It was also predicted that adherence to benevolent gender stereotypes would enhance the shifting standards effect by creating a larger difference between men's and women's ratings of ES in the objective condition and a smaller gender difference in these ratings in the subjective condition. This prediction was largely based upon the predicted differential effects of stereotype adherence by gender and condition which, as previously reported, were not found. The predicted three-way interaction between benevolent attitudes, gender, and condition was not significant. However, plots of the simple slopes of benevolent attitudes on ES ratings for the objective and

subjective condition did reveal a smaller gender difference in subjective ES ratings as adherence to benevolent stereotypes increased. This was because benevolent attitudes appeared to have a stronger positive association with subjective ratings of ES for men than for women. Given that the interaction between gender and benevolent attitudes was not significant, indicating that the association between benevolent attitudes and ES ratings did not differ significantly by gender, it seems unnecessary to speculate on explanations for this pattern at this time. However, this provides an interesting question for future research.

### **4.3 SOCIAL COMPARISON**

It was predicted that participants would be more likely to compare their partner with same-gender others than with those of the other-gender when rating their partners' provision of ES using a subjective scale. In other words, women would be more likely to compare their male partners' provision of ES with that of other men than with that of other women; whereas, men were predicted to compare their female partners' provision of emotional support with that of other women rather than with the ES provision of other men. Results supported this hypothesis for men, demonstrating that subjective ratings of emotional support were more strongly associated with the within-gender comparison item ("How much emotional support did your partner provide compared with that of the typical woman?") than the between-gender comparison item ("How much emotional support did your partner provide compared with that of the typical man?"). The hypothesis was not supported for women. For women, subjective

ratings of partners' provision of emotional support were equivalently associated with the between-gender and within-gender comparison items.

It is unclear why women's ratings of their partners' provision of ES did not demonstrate a stronger association with the within-gender comparison item than the between-gender comparison item, as men's did. It may be that women did not implicitly compare their partner with that of the typical man when rating his provision of ES. Or it may be that trying to compare their partner with that of the other-gender was so difficult a task that women simply responded the same way to this item as they did to the same-gender comparison item. Indeed, the correlation between the within-gender comparison item and the gender-neutral comparison item ("How much emotional support did your partner provide to you compared with that of most people in general?") was so high, especially for men, that it seemed that participants had trouble separating their comparison of their partner with same-gender others from that of others in general.

Examination of the means for these items reveals two interesting results. First, women did respond to the within-gender and between-gender comparison items differently. When comparing their partners with that of the typical man, women rated their partners as providing more support on average than the typical man. However, when comparing their partners with that of the typical woman, female participants rated their male partners as providing about the same amount of support on average as the typical woman. Men, on the other hand, rated their female partners' provision of ES as comparing more favorably with that of the typical man than with that of the typical woman. These results in conjunction reveal a clear acceptance of the stereotype that women on average provide more emotional support to their partners than men.

This is surprising given that, in this same sample, male partners were actually rated as providing more emotional support than female partners!

The overall favorable comparisons that men and women made between their own partners and same-gender others may have been due to their motivation when making those comparisons. Previous research suggests that when individuals are motivated by a need to enhance their self-esteem rather than a need for information they are likely to make downward comparisons, compare themselves with those less fortunate than themselves (Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983). In the current study, believing the typical man to be less emotionally supportive than their own partner allows for a downward comparison, enabling women to feel good about themselves and their relationships. The same is true for male participants who rated their female partners as providing more emotional support than the typical woman on average.

It is interesting however that, although women believed the typical man to provide less emotional support than the typical woman, they still rated their male partners as providing more emotional support to them on average than men said their female partners provided to them. What may be occurring is a variation of the false uniqueness effect. The false uniqueness effect is a cognitive bias in which individuals overestimate how unique they are compared with similar others (Campbell, 1986). In the case of the current study, participants were not overestimating their own uniqueness from others, but rather the uniqueness of their partner from others of the same gender. Women in particular expressed the belief that their own male partner provided much more ES than other men. However, given the fact that a majority of women in the sample expressed this belief, perhaps these male partners were more similar to other men than their partners thought. Again, this bias may have been motivated by a desire to increase self-esteem.

The false uniqueness phenomenon has been shown to be driven by a need to enhance one's ego (Suls & Wan, 1987).

Certainly believing that one's partner is superior to others in some way, in this case providing ES, can also serve to enhance one's own ego. Previous research has shown that idealizing one's partner is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and self-esteem (Murray, et al., 1996). Murray and colleagues (1996) found that individuals had a tendency to rate their current partner as being higher in positive personality attributes than the typical partner and that this bias was directly related to relationship satisfaction and self-esteem. The current study extends these findings to suggest that a positive bias can also occur when individuals are evaluating their partners' relationship abilities, in this case their ability to provide ES. This bias may be motivated by a desire to enhance one's ego and/or a desire to maintain a satisfying relationship.

#### **4.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In order to provide a better test of the shifting standards effect, future research should attempt to measure emotional support provision in a more objective manner than the current study was able to accomplish. One way that emotional support has been measured objectively is through the use of an observational paradigm (see Collins & Feeney, 2004; Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997; Simpson, et al., 1992). This paradigm typically has unbiased research assistants code videotaped support interactions in couples. In order to test if participants hold men and women to different standards with regard to the provision of emotional support, it is suggested that participants are

asked to view the videotaped interaction and indicate either the number of support behaviors that their partner provided during the interaction (objective rating of ES) or provide a subjective rating after viewing the videotape of how much support their partner provided to them (subjective measure of ES). This design would make the objective rating easier for participants and would eliminate some of the bias that can occur when participants are trying to recall information from a previous support interaction.

Another way to eliminate subjectivity in the objective measure of ES would be to utilize a daily diary design, such as that used by Dehle and colleagues (2001). Using this design participants would be asked to report either the number of support behaviors provided by their partner (objective measure of ES) or the amount of support provided by their partner (subjective measure of ES) at the end of each day for at least a week. This design would be subject to more memory bias than that of the observational design; however, it could also capture a more comprehensive picture of the everyday provision of emotional support within the relationship.

It may also be helpful to include objective and subjective measures of instrumental support provision to compare with the ES measures, because instrumental support is not subject to the same stereotypes as ES (Beach & Gupta, 2006), it would not be expected to be subject to the shifting standards effect. Evidence that ES ratings differ based on response scale type, but ratings of instrumental support do not would support the theory that the shifting standards effect is driven by the dual effect of stereotypes.

The current study gives an indication that the gender differences in ES provision may be changing. It may be that because women are now expecting and even demanding ES from their male partners, men are now providing this type of support more than they have been in the past. In order to explore this possibility it is suggested that the ES provision of older couples be

compared with that of young couples. Of course, relationship length would have to be controlled in this design as it is also possible that men are more emotionally supportive than women early in the relationship, but this gender difference reverses later on. In order to explore this possibility a longitudinal study that measures ES provision across the span of several years would be necessary.

The current study also indicates that adherence to stereotypes, especially benevolent stereotypes about men and women are associated with ratings of ES provision. It is possible that these stereotypes are also related to other measures of relationship qualities. Also, the pattern found in the current study of benevolent attitudes being more strongly associated with men's ratings of ES provision than women's deserves further exploration. It may be that the three-way interaction between benevolence, gender, and condition was not significant because there was inadequate power to detect this interaction. Based on the effect size found for this interaction and the number of predictors included in the model, a power analysis revealed that a sample of over 1000 participants would be necessary to attain adequate power to detect significance at the .05 level. While this finding was small and not significant for ES ratings, it may be that men's ratings of other partner qualities are more strongly influenced by stereotype adherence than women's ratings of these same qualities. It is recommended that future research accounts for the influence of stereotype adherence in partner ratings especially when gender differences in these ratings are of interest.

Perhaps the most surprising result of the current study was the finding that although male partners were rated as providing more ES than female partners, the stereotype that women provide more ES to their partners than men continued to be endorsed. This finding indicates the possibility of a false uniqueness bias influencing partner ratings. Future research is needed to

determine if this bias operates similarly in partner ratings of abilities as it does in personal ratings of abilities. For example, previous research has found that individuals believe that they are more similar to others in abilities which they feel they are lacking, but more unique in their strong abilities, especially those that are highly relevant to them (Campbell, 1986). The same may be true for partner ratings as well. Individuals may rate their partners as being similar to others in abilities that they feel their partner is lacking, but rate them as being unique in their strong abilities that are highly relevant to the participant. Perhaps one reason why female participants in the current study rated their partners more highly in ES provision than male participants and indicated that their partners provided far more ES than the typical man, was because ES provision was a quality that was more important to women in this sample than to men and thus more subject to the false uniqueness bias. This possibility deserves further exploration.

Although many of the hypotheses were not supported, the rather surprising results of the current study have led to interesting questions regarding the possibility of changing gender differences in the provision of emotional support, the influence of benevolent stereotypes on ratings of partners' relationship abilities, and the role of the false uniqueness bias in partner ratings and idealization. These questions deserve future research in an effort to untangle the mystery of conflicting findings with regard to gender differences in the provision of emotional support within relationships.

## APPENDIX A

### COMPLETE SURVEY WITH OBJECTIVE MEASURE OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

This survey is part of a research project being conducted by a University of Pittsburgh graduate student and faculty advisor. We are interested in measuring the types and amount of support provided to a romantic partner. You must be 18 years of age or older in order to complete this survey. You will receive 1 hour of research credit towards your Introduction to Psychology research requirement for completion of this study. Your participation is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. **Please print your responses clearly.** If you have any questions you may contact Melinda Ciccocioppo at [mmc57@pitt.edu](mailto:mmc57@pitt.edu). This is an anonymous survey. Please do not write your name anywhere on the forms. Your personal responses will not be identified in any way.

*Please think back to the last time you discussed a personal problem with your romantic partner.* This could be something like trying to change a bad habit, feeling stressed about school work or an upcoming exam, having an argument with a friend or family member, etc. The problem should NOT be one that involves your partner, for example having an argument with your partner.

Give a brief description of the problem below:

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Please circle the option that best indicates the last time that you discussed this problem with your partner.

- A. earlier today
- B. yesterday
- C. earlier this week
- D. last week
- E. more than a week ago

If you discussed this problem more than a week ago, please indicate when you last discussed this problem with your partner. \_\_\_\_\_

#### OBJECTIVE MEASURE OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Think about the interactions that you had with your partner when discussing this problem. For each of the following items, indicate as closely as you can how often your partner did each of these behaviors during those interactions. Please give an exact number for each behavior. If your partner did not perform a behavior place a "0" on the line.

#### **When discussing this problem, my partner...**

#### **How many times?**

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| 1. told me everything would be O.K.                          | _____ |
| 2. said he thought I handled a situation well.               | _____ |
| 3. expressed confidence in my ability to handle a situation. | _____ |
| 4. said good things about me.                                | _____ |
| 5. said it was O.K. to feel the way I was feeling.           | _____ |
| 6. took my side when discussing my situation.                | _____ |
| 7. said he would feel the same way in my situation.          | _____ |

8. said I was not at fault for my situation. \_\_\_\_\_

#### SOCIAL COMPARISON ITEMS

Continue to think about the discussions you had with your partner about a personal problem. Now think about *other couples in your age range* and how men and women in these couples typically act in similar situations. **Circle the one response which best expresses your opinion.**

#### **How much emotional support did your partner provide to you during these interactions...**

9. compared with how much you think most *men* in these other couples provide to their partners.

- A. Much less than most men
- B. Somewhat less than most men
- C. About the same as most men
- D. Somewhat more than most men
- E. Much more than most men

10. compared with how much you think most *women* in these other couples provide to their partners.

- A. Much less than most women
- B. Somewhat less than most women
- C. About the same as most women
- D. Somewhat more than most women
- E. Much more than most women

**How much emotional support did your partner provide to you during these interactions...**

11. Compared with how much you think most people in general provide to their partners.

- A. Much less than most people
- B. Somewhat less than most people
- C. About the same as most people
- D. Somewhat more than most people
- E. Much more than most people

Continue to think about the discussions you had with your partner about a personal problem.

**Circle the one response which best expresses your opinion.**

12. Overall how satisfied were you with the emotional support your partner provided to you during these discussions?

- A. Very unsatisfied
- B. Somewhat unsatisfied
- C. Somewhat satisfied
- D. Very satisfied

13. In general, how much emotional support did your partner provide you with during discussions of *this problem* compared with how much emotional support he *typically* provides you during discussions of personal problem?

- A. Much less emotional support than usual
- B. Somewhat less emotional support than usual
- C. Same amount of emotional support as usual
- D. Somewhat more emotional support than usual
- E. Much more emotional support than usual

**Please use the scantron sheet provided to record your responses to the following items.**

**Begin with #1 on the scantron sheet.**

1. What is your gender?
  - A. Male
  - B. Female
  
2. What is your age?
  - A. 18-20
  - B. 21-23
  - C. 24-26
  - D. 27-30
  - E. Over 30
  
3. What is your ethnicity?
  - A. Black or African American
  - B. Hispanic/Latino(a)
  - C. Asian
  - D. Caucasian/White
  - E. Multiracial
  
4. What is your parent's highest level of education? Indicate the level of education for the parent who has the most education.
  - A. Some high school
  - B. High School Diploma
  - C. Some college
  - D. Bachelors Degree
  - E. Advanced Degree

5. Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?
- A. Married or engaged
  - B. Living with boyfriend/girlfriend
  - C. Currently dating someone (but not living with him/her)
  - D. Not currently involved in a romantic relationship (but have been in the past)
  - E. Never been involved in a romantic relationship

Answer the following questions based on your current relationship.

6. How committed is this relationship?
- A. Casual (free to see other people)
  - B. Exclusive (expected to date only each other)
7. How long have you been involved in this relationship?
- A. Less than 1 month
  - B. 1 month to less than 6 months
  - C. 6 months to less than 1 year
  - D. 1 year to less than 2 years
  - E. 2 years or more
8. What is the gender of your partner?
- A. Male
  - B. Female

## RELATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT SCALE

Think about your current relationship. Please use the following scale to rate your current partner and relationship on each item. **Continue to record your responses on the scantron sheet.**

A= Not at all  
B= Very little  
C= Moderately  
D= A good deal  
E= Extremely

9. How well does your partner meet your needs?
10. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?
11. How good is your relationship compared to most?
12. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?
13. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?
14. How much do you love your partner?
15. How problematic is your relationship?

Continue on to the next page.

AMBIVALENT SEXISM INVENTORY & AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS MEN  
INVENTORY

Below is a series of statements concerning men and women and their relationships in contemporary society. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale:

A= Disagree strongly

B= Disagree slightly

C= Agree slightly

D= Agree strongly

16. No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.
17. Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for "equality".
18. In a disaster, women ought not necessarily to be rescued before men.
19. Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist.
20. Women are too easily offended
  
21. People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the other sex.
22. Feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than men.
23. Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.
24. Women should be cherished and protected by men.
25. Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them.
  
26. Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.
27. Every man ought to have a woman he adores.
28. Men are complete without women.
29. Women exaggerate problems they have at work.
30. Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.

A= Disagree strongly

B= Disagree slightly

C= Agree slightly

D= Agree strongly

31. When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.
32. A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.
33. There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.
34. Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility.
35. Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.
  
36. Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.
37. Women, compared to men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste.
38. Even if both members of a couple work, the woman ought to be more attentive to taking care of her man at home.
39. A man who is sexually attracted to a woman typically has no morals about doing whatever it takes to get her in bed.
40. Men are less likely to fall apart in emergencies than women are.
  
41. When men act to “help” women, they are often trying to prove they are better than women.
42. Every woman needs a male partner who will cherish her.
43. Men would be lost in this world if women weren’t there to guide them.
44. A woman will never be truly fulfilled in life if she doesn’t have a committed, long-term relationship with a man.
45. Men act like babies when they are sick.

A= Disagree strongly

B= Disagree slightly

C= Agree slightly

D= Agree strongly

46. Men will always fight to have greater control in society than women.

47. Men are mainly useful to provide financial security for women.

48. Even men who claim to be sensitive to women's rights really want a traditional relationship at home, with the woman performing most of the housekeeping and child care.

49. Every woman ought to have a man she adores.

50. Men are more willing to put themselves in danger to protect others.

51. Men usually try to dominate conversations when talking to women.

52. Most men pay lip service to equality for women, but can't handle having a woman as an equal.

53. Women are incomplete without men.

54. When it comes down to it, most men are really like children.

55. Men are more willing to take risks than women.

56. Most men sexually harass women, even if only in subtle ways, once they are in a position of power over them.

57. Women ought to take care of their men at home, because men would fall apart if they had to fend for themselves.

### Questions About You

**Using the scantron sheet**, please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale. There are no right or wrong answers. Please be as accurate and honest as you can and try not to let your response to one item influence your responses to other items.

A= Strongly disagree

B= Disagree

C=Neutral

D=Agree

E=Strongly agree

58. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.

59. It's easy for me to relax

60. If something can go wrong for me, it will.

61. I'm always optimistic about my future.

62. I enjoy my friends a lot.

63. It's important for me to keep busy.

64. I hardly ever expect things to go my way.

65. I don't get upset too easily.

66. I rarely count on good things happening to me.

67. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.

**Please place the survey and scantron sheet in the envelope provided and give it to the experimenter.**

Thank you for your participation!

## A.1 SUBJECTIVE MEASURE OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Think about the interactions that you had with your partner when discussing this problem. Please indicate how much your partner did each of the following during those interactions. (Please circle just one response for each item)

**When discussing this problem, my partner...**

14. told me everything would be O.K.

- A. Not at all
- B. A little
- C. Somewhat
- D. A good deal

15. said he thought I handled a situation well.

- A. Not at all
- B. A little
- C. Somewhat
- D. A good deal

16. expressed confidence in my ability to handle a situation.

- A. Not at all
- B. A little
- C. Somewhat
- D. A good deal

**When discussing this problem, my partner...**

17. said good things about me.

- A. Not at all
- B. A little
- C. Somewhat
- D. A good deal

18. said it was O.K. to feel the way I was feeling.

- A. Not at all
- B. A little
- C. Somewhat
- D. A good deal

19. took my side when discussing my situation.

- A. Not at all
- B. A little
- C. Somewhat
- D. A good deal

20. said he would feel the same way in my situation.

- A. Not at all
- B. A little
- C. Somewhat
- D. A good deal

21. said I was not at fault for my situation.

- A. Not at all
- B. A little
- C. Somewhat
- D. good deal

## **APPENDIX B**

### **DEBRIEFING SCRIPT FOR PARTICIPANTS**

It is commonly assumed that women are more nurturing and emotionally supportive in their relationships than men. Yet, given all of the research support and popular opinion that women should be more emotionally supportive partners than men, previous research often fails to find a gender difference in the amount of emotional support that romantic partners provide to one another. The purpose of the current study is to examine a possible cause of these conflicting findings. Specifically, it is suggested that men and women are held to different standards when it comes to assessing emotional support provision within a relationship. In this way men may be getting more credit for the emotional support they provide to their partners than women.

In order to test this theory, dating college undergraduates are being asked to indicate the amount of emotional support their partners provide to them using either an objective scale (estimating the exact number of emotional support behaviors performed by the partner) or a subjective scale (asking the participant to rate how often their partner performed the same emotional support behaviors on a scale from “not at all” to “a good deal”). It is predicted that ratings on the objective scale will reflect stereotypical gender differences with women being rated as providing more emotional support to their partners than men, while ratings on the

subjective scale will not reveal any gender differences in the provision of emotional support to the partner. This is because it is believed that when using the subjective scale, participants will compare their partners' emotional support provision with that of the "typical" man or woman. Since men are expected to be less emotionally supportive than women, male partners will be rated better comparatively than female partners.

**Please do not share this information with anyone you know who may be participating in this study as this knowledge may bias results. THANK YOU!**

If you have any questions or comments regarding this research, you can contact Melinda Ciccocioppo at [mmc57@pitt.edu](mailto:mmc57@pitt.edu) or 412-624-4544.

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