

The Man Behind the Woman

A Qualitative Study of the Spousal Support Received and Valued by Executive Women

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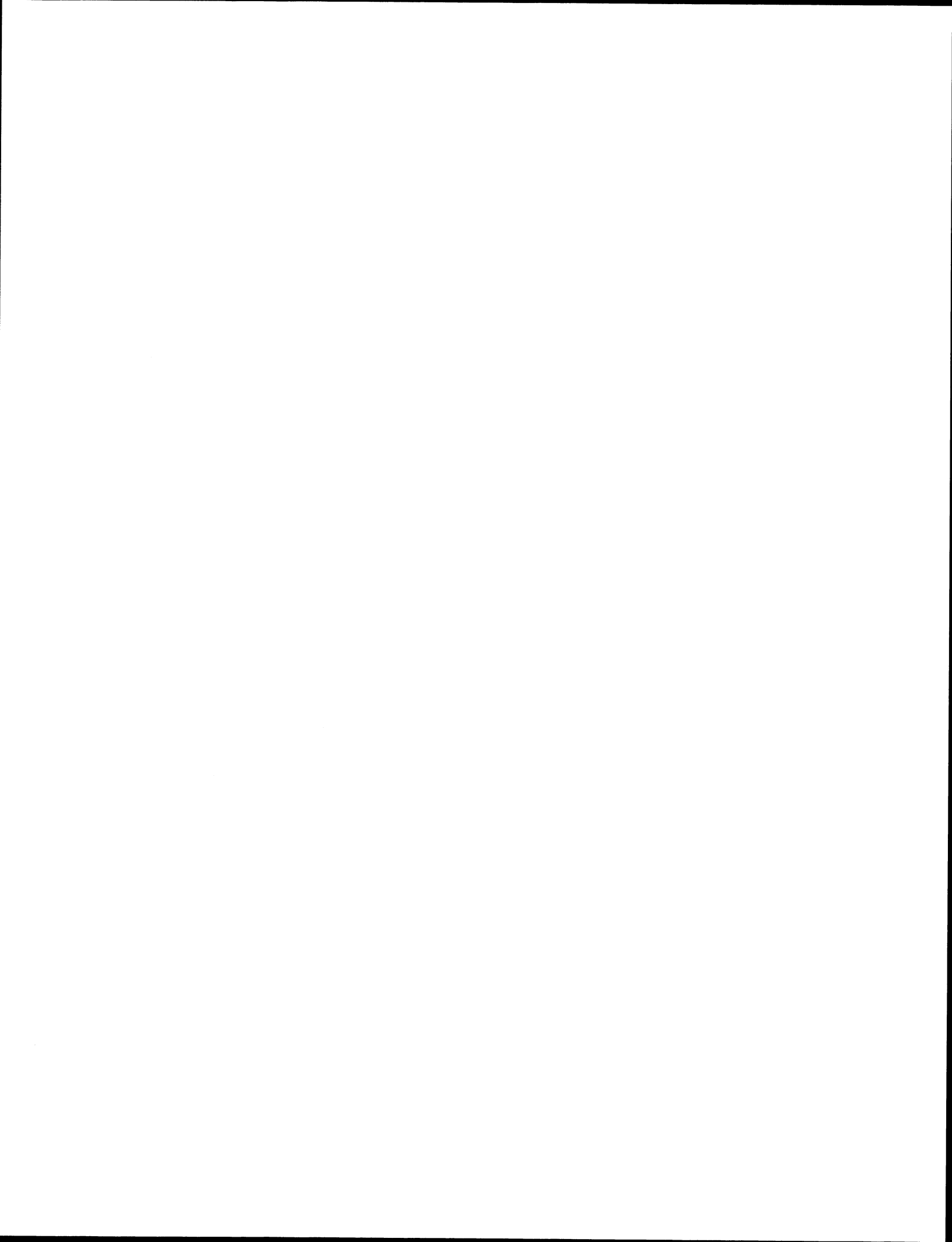
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Little is known about the spousal support received by married executive women and the support behaviors that they value. This article details the results of a qualitative study of 20 senior and executive-level women, with the aim of understanding their received and valued spousal support. An inductive typology was developed through semistructured interviews of the supportive behaviors deemed general, most valued, and least valued, as well as those behaviors perceived as being unsupportive, across six categories: emotional support, help with household, help with family members, career support, esteem support, and husbands' career and lifestyle choices. This article concludes by contextualizing the results relative to existing research, discussing study implications and limitations, and presenting recommendations.

Keywords: dual-career couples; qualitative research; social support; spousal support; women executives

Despite much research on the obstacles to career advancement encountered by women (for a review, see Phillips & Imhoff, 1997), little is known about the factors outside of work that sustain or hinder their progression, in particular, the social support provided by husbands. With evidence

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that women's paid work—even when they earn more—has not done much to alter gender norms (e.g., Pyke, 1994; Tichenor, 2005a), it is logical to venture that women executives might not enjoy as much support from their husbands as men generally do from their wives (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). This scenario could certainly be a factor in women's career development given that social support enhances professional success (e.g., Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Hertz, 1989).

Research remains lacking, however, in understanding the spousal support that a working woman values, in particular when she holds an executive position. Indeed, studies suggest that some support behaviors are valued more than others and that social support is most beneficial when it matches an individual's perceived needs (Beals & Peplau, 2005; Pearlin & McCall, 1990). The systematic attention to women's executive status is warranted because it could explain why women might exhibit support preferences. As executives, women regard their careers as being central to their identities; they experience the considerable demands of executive work; and they enjoy high purchasing power, which enables them to buy certain types of support, for example, child care (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hertz, 1989; Nelson & Burke, 2000). As women, they breach not only workplace standards that require them to be men but also social norms that require them to be caregivers (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002). Thus, research on the spousal support experiences of working women (e.g., Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004; Thorstad, Anderson, Lewis Hall, Willingham, & Carruthers, 2006), women in dual-career marriages (where both husband and wife hold full-time jobs; e.g., Parasuraman, Greenhaus, & Granrose, 1992), and women who simply earn more than their spouses do (e.g., Brennan, Barnett, & Gareis, 2001) may not be entirely applicable.

Therefore, the present study attempted to elucidate the spousal support concept and improve understanding of the needs of executive women—namely, by developing an inductive typology of the spousal support that such women receive and by assessing the relative salience of various types of support to demonstrate that some types are more important than others to this group. Because inductive approaches are suitable to understudied areas (Patton, 1990), a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate. This study ultimately aims to lay the groundwork for theory building on the interactions between a working woman's rank and occupation and her spousal support preferences, bridging sociopsychological insights on gender and couples with organizational theories of job demands and coping resources.

Literature Review

Stress is generally defined as an incongruence between environmental demands and coping resources. Social support is one critical coping resource, and it refers to everyday actions that convey care and concern (for reviews, see Cutrona, 1996; Vaux, 1988). For example, the job demands–job resources model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) and person–environment fit model (Quick, Nelson, Quick, & Orman, 2001) suggest that individuals who face significant work pressures with little support will likely experience strain, or the biobehavioral responses of a person experiencing stress. Social support is also a critical variable in the experience of work–life conflict: Role demands are less likely to translate into such conflict for individuals with support (Carlson & Perrewé, 1999).

Spouses constitute an important support source. They provide a sense of stability at home, help with child care, alleviate work–life conflict (Rao, Apte, & Subbakrishna, 2003), and are critical for working individuals (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2005; Janning, 2006). Women judge support at home as being vital, even if they have access to other support sources (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986). Studies uphold, however, a support-gap hypothesis, whereby women report levels of spousal support lower than men's (Xu & Burlison, 2001).

Research on dual-career couples provides ample support for this hypothesis. Couples find themselves having to renegotiate family roles (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005; Hertz, 1989) but without much success in achieving marital equality and comparable levels of mutual support (Deutsch, 1999; Tichenor, 2005b). Numerous studies on dual-career couples' career and work prioritization (e.g., Hertz, 1989; Janning, 2006; Maume, 2006) and men's contributions to housework (e.g., Coltrane & Adams, 2001; Pyke & Coltrane, 1996) and child care (e.g., Coltrane & Adams, 2001; Deutsch, 1999; Hertz, 1997, 1999) reveal husbands' enduring upper hand in marriage. Men have the final say in critical decisions, leaving inconsequential ones to women, even in marriages perceived as being egalitarian (Bartley et al., 2005) or in marriages where the woman earns more (Pyke, 1994; Tichenor, 2005a).

Although dual-career couples share household work more equitably than do other couples (Shelton & John, 1993), women still assume the lion's share of these responsibilities. When men contribute, they generally assume high-control duties—isolated tasks with no immediate urgency (e.g., mowing the lawn)—rather than low-control tasks, daily and inescapable, such as cooking and cleaning (Bartley et al., 2005). Women also worry about emasculating their husbands and hence refrain from asking them to do more (Hertz, 1989).

Similar patterns appear in the area of child care. Research suggests that the arrival of a child magnifies marital inequality (Deutsch, 1999; Steil, 1997). Domestic and emotional ineptitude act as resources that men use to minimize their contributions in child care (Coltrane & Adams, 2001). Of relevance to this study is the market approach to child care, where paid helpers are hired, a situation most prevalent among affluent couples who occupy senior work positions (Hertz, 1997). As such, husbands and wives are both career oriented and least likely to restructure employment to parent equally, thus preserving traditional gender roles (Hertz, 1999).

What remains lacking in research on such couples is an understanding of the spousal support behaviors that executive women value most, given the demands of their positions and this resilience of gender norms. Research shows that to get ahead, ambitious women, like men, must outperform expectations, take on high-profile assignments, and work long hours (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998). On top of these demands, they experience a glass ceiling, stereotyping, isolation, and conflicting career-family pressures (Bell, McLaughlin, & Sequeira, 2002; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002). Generally, women's careers cost them more in the private realm than do men's. According to a joint study by Families and Work Institute, Catalyst, and Boston College Center for Work and Family, 18% of women have delayed marriage, compared to 9% of men (Galinsky et al., 2003), and when married, the lopsided balance in men and women's household and child care contributions appears to hold true as well (Beatty, 1996; Hochschild & Machung, 1997; Nelson & Burke, 2000).

How do executive women cope? On the work front, studies point to the critical role of mentoring and supportive supervisors (Ragins et al., 1998) and, on the home front, stronger social support than that received by working women (LaRosa, 1990). Some early studies suggest that career-oriented women find husbands supportive of their careers and, in some cases, choose their careers over unsupportive partners (Gerson, 1986). Employment opportunities and the husband's encouragement appear critical for women's career goals to take hold (Hertz, 1989). Given the challenges that women face in the professional and private domains, one can appreciate their need for social support, particularly from their intimate partners. The present study aims to continue elucidating this important concern.

Method

Our qualitative approach was guided by the following questions: What are the types and categories of support provided by the husbands of executive

women? Which support behaviors are most and least valued, and which are considered unsupportive? Research guided by phenomenological paradigms emphasizes inductive reasoning to understand the human experience and to produce exploratory and descriptive results (Patton, 1990). Qualitative research also allows investigators the freedom and flexibility to explore in depth the complexity and context of an issue and to understand how individuals interpret and produce the world around them (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For these reasons, a qualitative design was deemed appropriate. Research exploring spousal support among executive women is limited, and scholars have called for greater use of qualitative methods in studying perceptions of fairness and unfairness within the household (e.g., Bartley et al., 2005). Moreover, the dynamics of spousal support are subjective and symbolic, thus better captured qualitatively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally, we did not seek to test existing theories or to generalize our findings; rather, we sought a more complex appreciation of the husbands' supporting role through analysis of 20 cases.

Data Collection

Our study targeted married executive women but included two who were divorced. Because these women had separated from their husbands for lack of social support, they were positioned to speak of supportive and unsupportive behaviors and the connections among spousal support, marital satisfaction, and career advancement. One of them had remarried about a month before the interview and provided insights into the support lacking in her first marriage and that provided by her second husband. A closer look at the support preferences of these two women further indicated that the women did not differ significantly from the rest in what they valued but certainly differed in what they received. We therefore retained their experiences in our analysis.

Consistent with previous research, executives were defined as individuals occupying one of the top five corporate echelons (Gersick & Kram, 2002). Because the qualitative nature of the study dictated theoretical rather than random sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we used referral (snowball sampling) to solicit the contributions of 20 participants (Welch, 1975). We began by identifying six personal and professional contacts qualifying for inclusion. E-mail invitations were sent to them, requesting their participation. Four agreed to participate; two did not respond after two attempts. Consistent with the snowball technique, each interviewee was asked to recommend eligible individuals, a process that we concluded when each additional interview

brought limited new insight. The data started showing signs of redundancy around the eighth interview, namely, in terms of the primacy of emotional support and the lesser value placed on help with the household. We nonetheless continued to recruit participants to increase the size of the sample and strengthen our analyses.

Participants

Our final sample of 20 participants was comparable in size to those of qualitative studies on executive women (e.g., Gersick & Kram, 2002; Zelechowski & Bilimoria, 2003). Represented were six private businesses, six public companies, five government agencies, and three nonprofits. Half our sample ($n = 10$) held position titles with the term *director*, 6 with the term *vice president*, 3 with the term *president*, and 1 with the term *manager*. Most ($n = 12$) were promoted from within their organizations to their current positions; 5 were hired externally; and the remaining 3 founded their businesses. The executives' average age was 49.50 ($SD = 9.52$). Most ($n = 12$) resided in the Northeast United States, 6 in the South, and 2 in the Northwest. The majority ($n = 14$) earned over \$100,000 annually, with 5 earning over \$250,000. Average years in current position was 6.70 ($SD = 4.43$), and average years of executive experience was 12.25 ($SD = 6.40$). The sample worked an average of 49.30 hr a week at the office ($SD = 8.89$), 10.20 hr at home ($SD = 9.65$), and 8.05 hr on home chores ($SD = 9.48$). Respondents were married for an average of 22.85 years ($SD = 11.74$), and 18 out of the 20 had children (see Table 1 for additional detail).

Interview Procedures

We followed a semistructured interview format beginning with questions pertaining to the participants' careers and support sources (e.g., "Tell me a little bit about your job"), meant to put the participants at ease before we moved to the more personal aspects of their spousal relationships. Then, we probed into the nature of received spousal support (e.g., "How would you describe the general attitude of your spouse towards your career?") as well as the participants' most valued support behaviors, behaviors perceived as well meaning but not fully supportive (least valued), and behaviors considered unsupportive (e.g., "Are there times when he is not as supportive as you would like?"). The interview protocol was pretested with a clinically trained and married research assistant, resulting in minor script changes. Consistent with inductive approaches, we maintained the flexibility

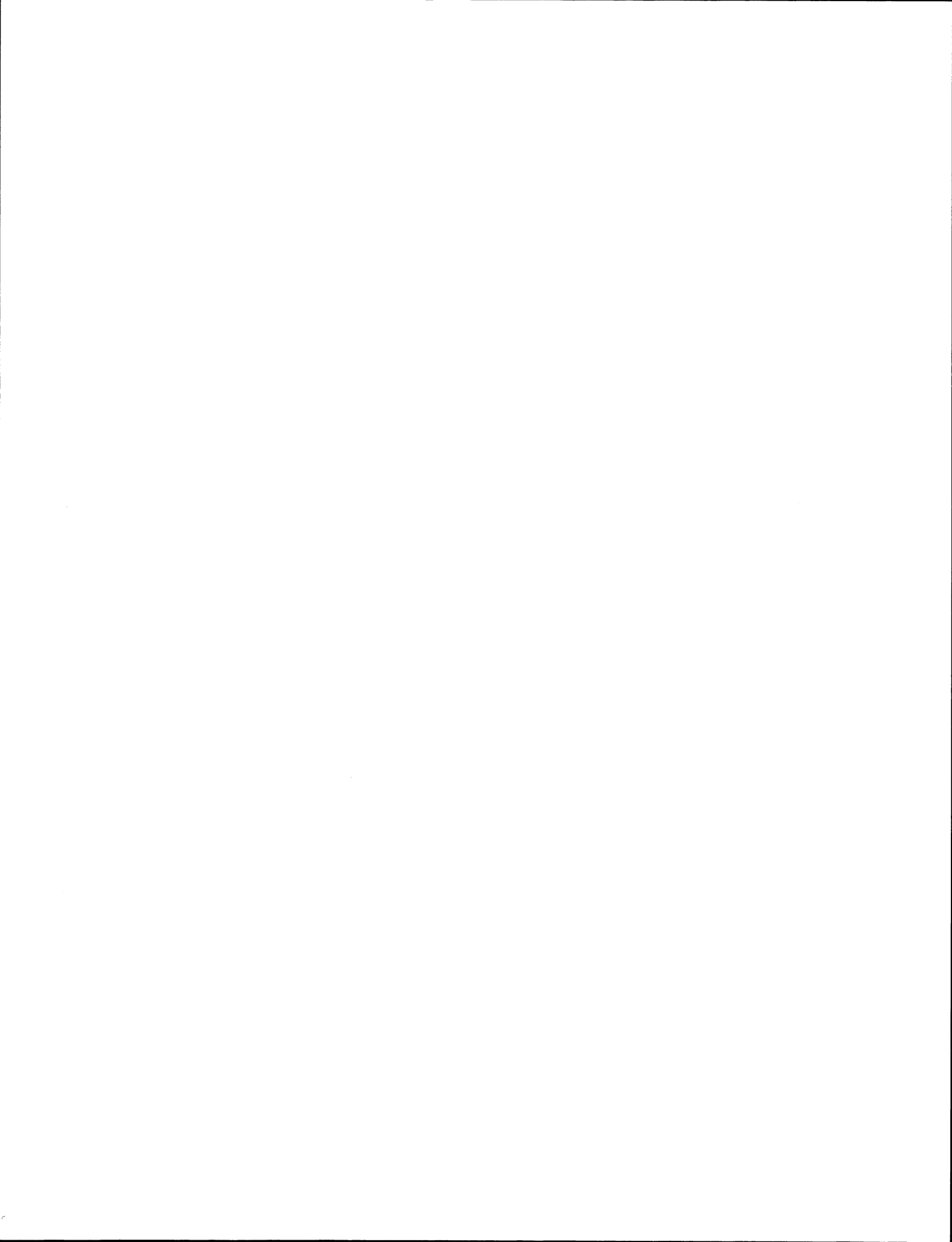


Table 1
Demographic Profile by Interviewee

Number and Title	Age	Education	Industry	Years			Children	Husband's Employment
				In Position	Executive Experience	Married		
1. President	46	Doctorate	Technology	3	27	20	2	FT professional
2. Executive director	44	Postgraduate	Consulting	3	15	20	0	Semiretired
3. Director	39	High school	Fashion	2	4	5	1	Senior executive
4. Senior manager	45	Master's	Insurance	9	20	22	2	FT professional
5. Director	30	Bachelor's	Construction	3	3	2	1	FT professional
6. Managing director	41	Postgraduate	Consulting	9	9	5	1	FT professional
7. Senior VP	51	Doctorate	Telecom	1	9	21	3	FT professional
8. Director	57	Master's	Higher education	12	8	32	2	FT professional
9. Executive VP	67	Doctorate	Consulting	12	12	46	3	Retired
10. Director	54	Master's	Nonprofit	15	15	30	2	FT professional
11. Managing director	34	Master's	Consulting	5	13	6	2	Business owner
12. Senior VP	40	Master's	Telecom	6	9	16	2	FT professional
13. President	57	Doctorate	Higher education	6	18	36	3	Senior executive
14. Executive director	59	Bachelor's	Nonprofit	15	15	30	2	FT professional
15. Senior VP	50	Bachelor's	Insurance	6	8	28	4	FT professional
16. Director	51	Graduate work	Government	1	1	28	3	Business owner
17. VP	57	Bachelor's	Technology	6	16	18	0	FT professional
18. Director	61	Graduate work	Government	10	15	35	2	Business owner
19. Senior VP	51	Doctorate	Telecom	2	10	26	2	Senior executive
20. President	56	Doctorate	Higher education	8	19	31	2	FT professional

Note: VP = vice president; FT = full-time.

to explore additional questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We conducted 17 interviews by telephone and 3 in person, each averaging 45 min. The respondents formally agreed to have the interview audiotaped, and assurances of confidentiality were reiterated. Finally, the participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire.

Content Analysis

The audiotapes were transcribed while preserving participants' anonymity. We content analyzed the manifest (evident) meaning of the transcripts to identify the types of support that participants received and valued. We subsequently explored the transcripts' latent meaning impressionistically, essentially recontextualizing and seeking to discern patterns in the data (Boyatzis, 1998). To provide supplemental validation, we compared our findings with current research and identified emerging differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

For content analysis, we closely read each transcript to identify behaviors considered supportive (most and least valued) and unsupportive. Per Miles and Huberman (1984), each distinct idea was recorded on an index card. The resulting cards were then organized into categories such that cards in one category referred to similar themes. All cards clearly fit into one of the categories, and none of the ideas was difficult to code, indicating that the six emergent categories may be independent and robust factors underlying spousal support. We followed a hybrid approach in labeling the categories such that some labels were data driven whereas others were derived from existing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We then counted the frequencies of ideas and categories across the corpus of transcripts.

To ensure the reliability of our categorization, the 233 cards were given to a clinically trained assistant, who was asked to organize them into the six categories. This allowed us to compute a percentage of agreement using the p statistic (number of correctly sorted cards / total number of cards; Light, 1971). The percentage of agreement was 100% for the categories of help with family members and career support. Agreement was 88.89% for esteem support, 86.67% for husbands' career and lifestyle choices, 85.11% for help with household management, and 48.25% for emotional support. Cumulative agreement was 70%. Clearly, most disagreement occurred in the emotional support category. In our coding, we had differentiated between general emotional support (labeled *emotional support*) and career-targeted support—which included emotional and instrumental support (labeled *career support*)—whereas the assistant coded all emotional support behaviors as *emotional support*. We thought it best on logical grounds to

include within the category of career support comments that, although referring to emotional support, primarily dealt with the spouse's professional activities. With these criteria in mind, we were able to clearly differentiate between comments that fell into career support or emotional support and thus proceeded with our analysis.

Limitations

One limitation involved the exclusion of husbands' perspectives, which prevented us from verifying the data's accuracy. Our participants' reports may have been affected by an egocentric or credit-taking bias, suggesting the tendency for individuals to overestimate or give more credit to themselves for their contributions to relationships (Fincham & Bradbury, 1989). This occurs because it is easier for individuals to remember their contributions than those of others (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). A partnercentric or credit-giving bias may have taken place here as well: The women in our sample may have possibly represented their husbands' behavior in the most favorable manner—a bias that tends to occur in happily married couples (Deutsch, Lozy, & Saxon, 1993) and in couples where wives earn more (Tichenor, 2005a).

Moreover, qualitative designs yield results with limited generalizability, though this was neither a stated objective nor technically possible in light of our methodology. Because many executive women are single and childless (Hewlett, 2002), the findings of this study on married women, most of whom had children, should be carefully generalized. In addition, the sample included predominantly White heterosexual women (85% of whom were Caucasian, 15% African American) in married relationships. Thus, this study's heterosexual and racial biases prevent the findings from being generalizable to other groups, particularly minorities and lesbians. The unique challenges experienced by these women are described in our closing statements.

Findings

Spousal Support Categories

Content analysis resulted in six support categories: emotional support, household help, help with family members, esteem support, career support, and husbands' career and lifestyle choices. Table 2 lists each with a representative statement. Table 3 presents an inductive typology of the general, most valued, least valued, and unsupportive behaviors across the six categories, with each category cited by at least 7 participants.

Table 2
Categories of Spousal Support Received by Executive Women

Category	Representative Statement (Participant)
Emotional support	By the time I get home, a lot of times I really didn't want to talk anymore, but there were times when I would rant and rave about, you know, especially about the chauvinistic boss, and [he] was right there. I mean, he was listening all the time. And I mean he was a shoulder to cry on. I just can't <i>imagine</i> [emphasis] having gotten where I was without him. (No. 18)
Help with household	At home, he helps out with everything at the house, from taking the garbage out, helping out with the laundry. He actually probably does even more than I do because he likes everything to be back in its spot. Even at home, we have pretty much a fifty-fifty split, which works out well. (No. 5)
Help with family members	When it looked like my father wasn't going to live much longer, my husband just dropped everything, drove down, and stayed with my mother until I could get down there and was actually with my father when he died, was actually holding him, and took care of everything. So by the time I got down there, everything was arranged. My husband did everything. (No. 13)
Career support	So, even though I wasn't really interested, I think my husband saw what a great thing this could be and told the person, "She'll send you her resume." So, to make a long story short, I got the job. I'm glad that he had the vision to see what role I could play. I guess I should thank my husband for convincing me to give it a try. (No. 19)
Esteem support	And his belief in me. He doesn't think there's anything I can't do. Even I know there are things I can't do [<i>laughs</i>]. If I tell him I'm going to become a doctor tomorrow and do brain surgery, he'll say "Okay, sounds great." (No. 6)
Husbands' career and lifestyle choices	But then surprise, I got pregnant, and we had a decision to make because neither one of us wanted to have baby-sitters. So he said, "Well, I will stay home," and so [his business] was at our house, and he actually, for years, he worked at home and took care of [our child], took [our child] with him every place, and allowed me to do what I needed to do to advance in my career—you know, never [<i>voice trails off</i>], never thought twice about it; it was the most natural thing. (No. 18)

Table 3
Inductive Typology of Spousal Support Behaviors and Preferences

General Support Behaviors	Most Valued Support Behaviors	Least Valued Support Behaviors	Unsupportive Behaviors
Emotional Support			
Able and willing to listen (11/7)	Able and willing to listen (6/4)	Commands rather than listening to her (2/1)	Mentions her absence from home in public (4/3)
Celebrates her successes (10/7)	Supportive when she gets worked up (6/3)	Listens without helping her solve a problem (1/1)	Commands her rather than listening to her (5/2)
He is her best friend (4/2)	Allowed her the freedom to run her life (1/1)	<i>Frequency: 3/2</i>	Does not live up to claims of support (4/2)
Supportive when she gets worked up (3/2)	<i>Frequency: 13/7</i>		Withdraws emotionally in times of conflict (1/1)
Verbally supportive (1/1)			<i>Frequency: 13/7</i>
Supportive when she is tired or ill (1/1)			
<i>Frequency: 34/14</i>			
Help With Household			
Takes care of home chores (10/8)	Takes care of home chores, including meal preparation (8/2)	"I can take care of myself" (1/1)	Does not help enough with home chores (18/7)
Prepares meals (6/3)	<i>Frequency: 8/2</i>	<i>Frequency: 1/1</i>	Does not take initiative with home chores (11/6)
Takes care of the bills (5/3)			<i>Frequency: 29/9</i>
Takes initiative with home chores (3/3)			
Willing to spend money on help (1/1)			
<i>Frequency: 25/13</i>			

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

General Support Behaviors	Most Valued Support Behaviors	Least Valued Support Behaviors	Unsupportive Behaviors
Help With Family Members			
Takes care of children (22/9) Takes care of elderly parents (3/3) Takes care of dogs (3/2) Takes care of cats (1/1) <i>Frequency: 26/10</i>	Takes care of children (9/5) Willing to spend money on help with the children (2/1) <i>Frequency: 11/5</i>		Does not help her with child rearing (3/3) <i>Frequency: 3/3</i>
Career Support			
Makes space for her to work (10/5) Offers technical assistance (7/3) Supports furthering her education (6/3) Helps when she travels (5/3) Offers valued professional advice (2/2) <i>Frequency: 30/11</i>	Makes space for her to work (4/2) Helps when she travels (1/1) <i>Frequency: 5/3</i>	Has high expectations for his wife (2/2) <i>Frequency: 2/2</i>	Aggravated at the demands of her work (10/4) Does not accompany her to functions (2/2) <i>Frequency: 12/4</i>

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

General Support Behaviors	Most Valued Support Behaviors	Least Valued Support Behaviors	Unsupportive Behaviors
Esteem Support			
Is proud of her (10/6)	Is proud of her (7/4)	Assumes that she needs all that he does (2/2)	Is threatened/resentful of her achievement (1/1)
Has faith in her capacities (3/2)	Believes in her capacities (5/4)	Is excessively protective (2/2)	Is neutral towards her achievement (1/1)
Believes in the value of her work (3/1)	<i>Frequency: 12/5</i>	<i>Frequency: 4/3</i>	<i>Frequency: 4/3</i>
Trusts her and is honest with her (2/1)			
Is kind to her (1/1)			
<i>Frequency: 19/9</i>			
Husbands' Career and Lifestyle			
Takes the role of a "house husband" (6/3)			His work is more important than hers (8/4)
Rearranges his schedule (2/2)			He does not try to improve himself (2/2)
Relocated with her (1/1)			<i>Frequency: 10/6</i>
<i>Frequency: 12/7</i>			

Note: The number to the left indicates how many times the thought unit or category appeared in the data. The number to the right indicates the number of transcripts where the idea or category was expressed

Emotional support. Emotional support consists of behaviors that provide encouragement and understanding (King, Mattimore, King, & Adams, 1995), and it was the most reported category of spousal support. The husband's communication skills—particularly, his ability and willingness to listen—were a prominent example of emotional support received by our participants. Some emphasized the husband's emotional support during stressful episodes:

Whenever I get myself worked up, he's the one to straighten me out and remind me that I'm just overreacting. . . . He keeps me—I tend to get worked up on occasion and let things get the better of me, and he's always there to remind me, "What are you doing? You're thinking crazy again." (No. 5)

Help with household. Help with the household was the second-most-cited category, including cleaning, cooking, taking care of bills, and a willingness to spend money on help:

If I can't be home and he can't cook dinner, then he'll stop and pick up dinner. [He] doesn't mind spending money to make life simpler. I think sometimes, I know some people, even if there are two of them working, they're still very conservative. And I just find that that helps me a lot. (No. 16)

The women were particularly appreciative when the husbands helped without the women's "having to ask," essentially addressing household needs as they arose and at other times showing a clear willingness to take directives.

Nevertheless, a disparity in household contributions was palpable: "But within the confines of the marriage and you'll find this—that it's never 50-50, sometimes it's 75-25, and sometimes it's 60-40, but it's seldom 50-50. You're going to do what needs to be done" (No. 9). Sometimes women described a household activity as not being within the strengths of the spouse, perhaps excusing his lack of support in that area. Furthermore, some couples seemed to divide work along gender-stereotypical lines:

Lots of times I think families divide things along what I'd call stereotypical gender roles. Well, it takes a lot less time to mow the grass or shovel the sidewalk or wash the car than it does to keep the house clean, keep the laundry done, go grocery shopping, and prepare the stupid meals every night and clean up afterwards. I mean, those are like daily responsibilities, and you can't not do them or your family is not going to eat. Whereas, you know, okay, what, wash the car once a week. (No. 14)

Help with family members. The women in our study reported their spouses' help with family members, such as helping with children and aging family members and attending to the family's pets. Husbands in this category took time off from work and rearranged their schedules to transport children to school and after-school activities and to help them with their homework, essentially addressing all child-related logistics, especially when the women had to travel and attend to work responsibilities. In some excerpts, the husband's ability to prevent his wife's worry over competing work and family demands was noticeable:

He helps me when I need help, when I have to travel, he takes care of [our son], and I don't have to worry about a thing. That's the main thing—I can leave there, and I know that he's being well taken care of, and the house and the dogs are okay. He's my support system, and I know if I have an early meeting, he'll take [our son] to school or if I have to work late, he'll pick him up, and I don't have to feel that stress. (No. 3)

[He] allowed me to never have to ever say to a manager that I couldn't do something because [of] home. I never had to say to anybody at work, "Well, I will have to call and ask [my husband] to see if he is available to watch [the children] so I can go someplace." Nah-ah, it was just the case that I would say, "—— [husband's name], I got to go to Pittsburgh tonight, and I am not going to be home," you know, and that was it. (No. 18)

Career assistance. The fourth category concerned emotional and instrumental support targeted at the women's career demands. The participants described instrumental support in terms of offering technical assistance and giving professional advice:

And I just sat him down—and I've done this a bunch of times—where I'm like, "Help me," and he points me to the accountant, and he points me to the system I need to use, and when I have questions about invoices or accounts, he's just there. Financial issues remind me of sort of like a technical problem that you have at work. This could be a 15-minute thing, or it could be a 15-hour thing, and if you've got the right resources, you can make it a 15-minute thing, so [my husband] makes a lot of stuff, particularly financial issues, 15-minute things for me. (No. 11)

More important, emotional support that made space for the participants to work and encouraged their advancement appeared in this category as well. The husbands understood the importance of their wives' work and therefore did not fuss over their busy schedules:

Well, he gives me time to work on things without hassling me or making me feel guilty. . . . He understands the priority of work. . . . He's always encouraging and advocating for my advancement in any way, and he doesn't see it as competition. (No. 6)

Esteem support. Esteem support provides people with respect and a sense of validation (Xu & Burleson, 2001). Our data included items pertaining to positive attitudes and behavioral expressions of support toward the wife, such as the pride that a husband felt, his faith in her capacities, and his appreciation of her work. In the words of one participant (No. 2), "I think he's very supportive and he's very proud. He thinks what I do is really neat, and I think that he's fulfilled at some level by what I do."

Several experiences resemble those found by Hertz (1989) in a study of dual-career corporate couples that revealed the combined importance of the husband's validation and the woman's career opportunities in fostering the career development of the executive woman:

When I was at — [company name], he always believed in me and said, "You should be the VP of marketing." And I was like, "Me?" And so he's always been [the one that] claimed things for me. And pushing, not pushy-pushy, but just the real belief that I'm as smart as any of them and they're crazy not to do it. (No. 17)

Husband's career and lifestyle choices. The final emergent category concerned the extent to which the husband's career and lifestyle choices supported the wife's high-profile occupation. Examples included husbands who stayed at home with children temporarily or permanently, rearranged their work schedules, and relocated with their wives, essentially leading lives that allowed the participants to dedicate themselves to their careers:

When I came back to work in 1990, he was a really important key in me being able to do that and have three children. He could wait and leave home in the morning after everyone got on the bus. He could pick the kids up at day care or at the school, and he could cook dinner on nights that I wasn't available, help with homework. You know, he was very involved in all of that with our children. Otherwise, I wouldn't have survived. (No. 16)

Spousal Support Preferences

We next report on the spousal support behaviors that the participants most and least valued and the behaviors that they considered unsupportive, across the six categories (see Table 3).

Most valued support. In descending order, the most valued behaviors included emotional support, esteem support, help with family members, career support, and help with the household. Two participants declared valuing anything that the spouse did and therefore did not express preferences. Emotional support (attentive listening and a supportive stance during stressful episodes) and esteem support were the most frequently alluded behaviors:

I think what I value most is that he's always calm and he's always positive. I mean, no matter what, it's always like, "That's okay honey. It will be okay." He never, ever just says, "Well, yeah, isn't that just awful." He's positive and he just . . . he's calm and he's positive. And he uses his sense of humor. So if I'm having one of my moods, you know, I've just had a really rough day, or I'm frustrated with one of the kids, he'll do something really funny just to make me laugh. And so . . . I'd say that's probably—those would be the best things. (No. 12)

Regarding help with family members, five women most valued help in taking care of children, especially if the two spouses agreed that hired help was not a viable option:

Any mother has guilt when they're away from their child or away from the family. So for me, the thing that I appreciated most was that our daughter was never . . . I mean, she wasn't raised by nannies. She was raised by both of her parents. Sometimes we were there together, sometimes we were not. But at all times, she had one parent that was there paying attention to her, so I'm very grateful for that. (No. 7)

With respect to career support, two women mentioned as their most valued support the husband's willingness to make space for his wife to pursue her career:

I think [what] I value the most [is] that he does not give me a hard time, that he doesn't tell me that I'm not meeting his expectations on any level, whether that is "I spend too much time working," "I'm distracted," "I'm not helping with the household stuff." He never complains that I'm not living up to some standard of wife. (No. 2)

Finally, only two women most valued their husband's help with home chores, namely, cleaning and preparing meals.

Least valued support. Least valued support consisted of support that was meant to be supportive and was sometimes perceived as well meaning but did not come across as entirely so, including husbands' commanding behavior

(instead of their advising behavior) as well as their overprotective behavior—for instance, one participant mentioned her husband's "wanting to jump in there and fight my battles for me. He has a very strong protective streak . . . so it's in his nature to be a knight in shining armor" (No. 6). In the words of another participant, this behavior took the form of

when he says to me, "Do it this way" or "Do this, this, and this." If I asked for your opinion, I wouldn't want you to tell me, "Do this, this, and this." I want to hear an opinion; I don't want to hear a demand. (No. 8)

Others mentioned their husbands' assumption that their wives depended on the men for support:

I've always been so independent, so sometimes I'm like "I can figure it out on my own." I know he's trying to be helpful, but I guess that's probably it, because I've always been so independent and used to doing my own thing that sometimes, I just tell him to leave me alone, I can figure it out. (No. 5)

In the realm of emotional support, least valued support behaviors included two contradicting stances. One participant mentioned that her husband's listening to her without helping her solve a given problem was least valued, whereas two others reported that their husbands were more concerned with communicating their viewpoints and thus failed to empathically listen:

Sometimes he's not very good at empathizing or understanding how I feel about things. He's opinionated, and sometimes I feel like he is more concerned about telling me his opinion of a situation than understanding how I feel about it. (No. 4)

Regarding career support, two women stated that their husbands entertained what they perceived to be excessively high expectations. Although these women appreciated that their husbands held their wives' abilities in high esteem, the participants still felt as though they were asked to do too much:

He wants me to do the world, and I don't want to do the world [*laughs*]. If I went home and said, "I've been asked to do these six things," he would tell me I should do all six [*laughs*]. And, it's like, "No" [*laughs*]. That, to me, is the downside. (No. 15)

Finally, one participant stated that her husband's help around the house was least valued as a support behavior: "I mean, I can take care of that

myself. It's nice, it's like icing. If I had to let something go, I could manage to make my own meals" (No. 2).

Unsupportive behaviors. The participants reported unsupportive behaviors in all six categories. Ranking first was inadequate help with the household, whether in the form of insufficient help or lack of initiative. The participants also noted that even when their husbands did help, they acted as if they were helping the wives do their jobs, rather than viewing housework as a joint responsibility:

With my first husband, I had to ask him to do everything. You know, things that were obvious, like the clothes piling out of the hamper, and he wouldn't do it unless you asked him to do something, and then he would say, "Well, I did it for you," like it was my responsibility, and he was just doing it for me, where my second husband, he just does things. He knows what needs to be done and he just does them, and it relieves a huge emotional burden and feeling of guilt, really. Because my first husband used to make me feel guilty about him having to do things that he thought were my responsibility. (No. 1)

Lack of emotional support also ranked high as an example of unsupportive behavior. Several participants reported that their husbands embarrassed them in public by mentioning their absence from home and that their husbands refused to accompany them to work-related functions. Similarly, two other women stated that their husbands made public claims of support but did not actually live up to those claims: "Well, yeah, he said he was supportive, but when it came to actually putting that into play or living with the consequences of that, he was much less supportive" (No. 1).

The commanding behaviors that some women noted as being least valued were perceived by others as being downright unsupportive:

Sometimes, I'll have to preface it by saying, "I just need you to listen. I don't want you to tell me what to do, how to feel, or what you think. I just need you to listen." Because his natural reaction is he wants to fix it or tell me what to do . . . sometimes I get to a point where I'm not even going to bother. (No. 4)

Regarding the husbands' careers and lifestyle choices, four women believed that their spouses' careers took precedence over theirs and that they sometimes had to "opt for the slower road" as a result:

Either I could let the kids fall apart, or I did opt for the slower road. And while he says, "No, no. Go do, and go travel, and do whatever," the reality is he couldn't back that up because of his work commitment. (No. 15)

Even though he was proud of what I do and still is and he thinks that what I do is important, there is something in him that obviously thinks it's not as important as what he does. His career was always more important, and my career was secondary. (No. 14)

Limited career support was the fourth category of unsupportive behavior. Four women stated that their husbands acted in an unsupportive manner when they failed to understand their work demands. These husbands were "aggravated" when their wives had to travel and work during time that the husbands considered theirs. One participant referred to "the inquisition" as the continuous questioning and hassling that her husband exposed her to every time that she traveled (No. 20).

With respect to the spouse's esteem support, three women reported that husbands who were neutral, resentful, and threatened by their wives' achievement came across as being unsupportive:

It was enormously puzzling and threatening to him. He tried to be supportive in his way, but it was very hard for him to make that transition. He didn't have any actual respect or regard for the work I did. He didn't understand it. He was basically resentful. (No. 9)

Finally, although the majority of the participants reported that their husbands did help with the children, three women reported that their husbands did not help much in this area, especially when the children were younger.

Discussion

Our goal was to explore the types of support that executive women received and valued. Qualitative interviews, appropriate to understudied and intensely personal experiences, served to generate textual data. We found that the husbands in our study engaged in 28 different supportive behaviors and attitudes, which we coded and organized into six categories. We want to call attention here to the overall emotional tenor of our interviews, which was not necessarily captured in the data. Most participants believed that spousal support was a critical issue in their lives and careers and so welcomed the opportunity to talk about it.

The results clearly indicate that spousal support is a rich and multifaceted phenomenon. By identifying supportive and unsupportive behaviors, as well as emotional and instrumental behaviors, in a range of domains (e.g., career, family, household), our inductive typology expands on the

simpler emotional–instrumental dichotomy recorded in previous studies (e.g., Adams, King, & King, 1996; Fenlason & Beehr, 1994; King et al., 1995). For example, career-targeted support included technical assistance as well as the critical emotional support of making space for women to work, whereas in the domain of help with family members, the women enjoyed concrete assistance but more so valued the emotional support of not having to worry about addressing competing work and family demands. Also discovered were behaviors above and beyond mere acts of care or concern, including systematic changes in the husband's career and lifestyle to accommodate the wife, such as relocating, restricting work, and staying at home with the children, behaviors once thought to be carried out mainly by women. These findings contradict earlier research showing that men retain the upper hand in the family's decision making (Bartley et al., 2005). The pervasiveness and variety of received spousal support preliminarily hint to the spouse's critical role in enabling these women to achieve the elusive goal of having it all.

The results also reveal that not all spousal behaviors are supportive. A number of less valued and blatantly unsupportive behaviors emerged from this investigation. Above and beyond insufficient help with and lack of initiative toward household and child care matters (an already well-documented phenomenon for married working women), the women in our study reported that their spouses sometimes failed to empathically listen to their concerns and instead commanded them and wanted to fight their battles for them. Too much support can sometimes be perceived as being unsupportive, as illustrated by husbands' entertaining unrealistically high professional expectations for their wives.

In addition, an element of intentional harm appears when husbands embarrass their wives publicly, refuse to accompany them to functions, assume that their careers (the husbands') matter more, are resentful of their wives' success, are aggravated at their wives' work demands, and continue to hold them accountable for hearth and home when their career demands are clearly inordinate. Such behaviors are potentially undermining rather than merely unsupportive (Vinokur & Van Ryn, 1993). The husbands were possibly retaliating by withholding support (Tichenor, 2005b) or simply living up to tradition: "But if you were to ask him, he would still believe that a woman's place is in the home and a man's place is out there with the business, which is pretty typical" (No. 8). Supportive and undermining behaviors are not opposites but independent behaviors that can coexist and make independent contributions to well-being, and when these do arise in temporal proximity, they can influence each other's impact (DeLongis,

Capreol, Holtzman, O'Brien, & Campbell, 2004). That only a few undermining behaviors emerged in this study could be explained by research showing that negative social interactions are perceived as being less serious when they occur in the context of a highly supportive marriage (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; DeLongis et al., 2004). Given this study's exploratory nature, further research is warranted on the frequency and coexistence of support and undermining in the lives of executive women.

The study's findings also lend credence to the idea that some support behaviors are valued more than others, as argued at the onset. Our findings indicate that women generally value (in descending order) emotional support, esteem support, help with family members, career support, and help with the household. The data speak to the primacy of emotional support, notably, the husband's empathic listening, especially during high-stress episodes, despite evidence that men are not socialized to provide such support (Xu & Burleson, 2001). One woman described how she had to teach her husband to be emotionally supportive: "But we always talked. We always talked . . . and I taught him to talk. I come from a very verbal background, and women tend to be, you know, more verbal, I think" (No. 13). The fact that lack of emotional support also ranked high among unsupportive behaviors further confirms the importance of emotional support and possibly indicates that executive and nonexecutive women may not differ much in valuing such support (Neff & Karney, 2005). However, the emergence of career support (instrumental and emotional) and esteem support (specifically, pride and room for dedication to work) as distinct categories preliminarily suggests that such support is important to high-achieving women, although rigorous comparisons are needed.

The women valued the husbands' help with family members and, to a lesser extent, his participation in household affairs. Although these women can afford to hire help with the children, some of them had made the deliberate decision not to do so, challenging the notion that career success implies reliance on market approaches to child care (Hertz, 1997). The husband's help with children becomes paramount in this situation, and more research is needed to understand the differences between career-committed couples who choose to hire help and those who attempt to raise their children without such help.

Additionally, when help around the house was provided, it seemed to fall within high-control areas (Bartley et al., 2005) and was not frequently cited as being most valued. The participants valued husbands who took initiative, which is consistent with research suggesting that support is more appreciated when it is instinctively provided rather than solicited (Cutrona, 1996).

Perhaps our participants were similar to Gerson's (1986) in that they had engaged in a "partially successful struggle" (p. 629) to get their spouses involved in housework. Alternatively, their purchasing power allowed the couple to outsource such chores, possibly lowering the value of the husband's assistance. Nine of our participants had indeed used paid help, a finding consistent with earlier findings that home chores are more likely outsourced in households with working women (Gray, 1983). At the same time, however, the lack of help with home chores ranked first as indicator of an unsupportive stance. As recorded in research on dual-career couples, the disparity in contributions to the household was apparent in our findings and was explained by some as stemming from their spouses' traditional views of gender roles and household work not being within the husbands' strengths. Other participants experienced the occasional "creeping of a male default" (No. 11), and it is possible that the participants feared emasculating their husbands by asking them to do more.

Taken together, our findings parallel Gerson's (1986) earlier discovery that career-committed women found men supportive of career and family. By and large, the women in our study valued support that affirms their autonomy; they do not value support that is patriarchal and domineering (e.g., protectiveness analogous to the knight in shining armor). When approached from the dichotomy between instrumental versus emotional support, the women's support preferences centered on the emotional. That instrumental help can be bought whereas emotional support cannot, let alone be given to oneself with ease, could explain these findings. Moreover, that most of these women achieved considerable career success while preserving their marriages strongly points to their abilities to steer through their husbands' support and value what the men can provide. We can venture to argue that gender norms persist even in the marriages of highly successful women and that marital equality and reciprocity are not necessarily achieved when the women are executives:

I think that with executive women, we're still trying to do the traditional wife thing. And with the executive men, these guys pretty much work all the time and then come home and expect to be pampered whenever they show up. (No. 7)

Women sometimes learn to live without support that is defined on their own terms, but they do so up to a point, given that two of our participants had separated for lack of sufficient support. As we argue below, research is clearly needed on the relations between spousal support and marital survival in the lives of executive women.

Conclusion

Rising attention to the repercussions of stress and work–life conflict has generated ample interest in social support as a coping resource. Moreover, social support research has focused more on work rather than family support sources, and executive women have been largely overlooked (Adams et al., 1996). This study contributes to this body of knowledge by examining the spousal support provided to the high-achieving executive woman. Because we found that spouses engage in numerous support behaviors, this study provides further evidence for their role in buffering the stressor–strain relationship and in alleviating work–life conflict.

This study also corroborates the significance of nonwork support for executive women along with the work support already addressed in research. Various sources and types of support are needed for women to pursue careers, have families, and challenge convention in the process. Our participants most valued emotional and esteem support, whereas in the instrumental realm, they most valued their husbands' help with family members, thereby maintaining the notion that some support behaviors are valued more than others. We also identified a few behaviors that were potentially undermining; however, our understanding of spousal support will not be complete without research on how support and undermining coexist in relationships.

Several recommendations for future research emerge from these findings. Given individuals' tendency to make more or less generous attributions of responsibility for their spouses' behavior (Deutsch et al., 1993), future research should not rely on only one party's reports. Scholars should longitudinally examine dyadic support dynamics to study support in relation to other variables—namely, views on gender, career success, and marital satisfaction and survival. Indeed, we have shown that husbands are capable of engaging in behaviors outside stereotypical gender norms, such as empathic listening, child rearing, and restricting work to accommodate their spouses, confirming that gender roles are changing in meaning.

In addition, the emerging typology of spousal support should be subjected to testing and validation using quantitative designs on larger samples. Here, we strongly encourage researchers to account for differences along generation, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Research suggests that younger and less traditional couples better manage the unusual situation where wives earn more (Tichenor, 2005a), thus begging the question Will executive women of different generations differ in the spousal support that they receive and value?

Regarding ethnicity, our sample comprised predominantly White executive women, and although White and minority women share common obstacles to advancement (e.g., scarcity of mentors and professional networks, lack of significant and high-profile experience), considerable evidence indicates that minority women—in particular, Black women—must downplay not only their gender in workplace interactions but also their race (Combs, 2003; Tucker, Wolfe, Viruell-Fuentes, & Smooth, 1999). On the home front, Black couples display more egalitarian divisions of household labor than what is common in White families (Broman, 1991; Shelton & John, 1993). Given these differences and evidence that Black women tap into other support systems (e.g., church, community; see Hewlett, Luce, & West, 2005), the question becomes Will they display significant differences in received and valued spousal support?

Similarly, this study included exclusively heterosexual women in married relationships. We must be careful in generalizing what the women in our sample received and valued to what lesbian women receive and value. Research suggests that lesbian couples experience extraordinary and unique stressors (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004). Whereas all parents face the time constraints and exhaustion associated with rearing young children, lesbian couples generally lack the parenting models available to others, and their gender role socialization can confuse them on “who gets to be the man and the woman” (Connolly, 2006; Kurdek, 2007). Lesbian couples have also been found to be more egalitarian in the household and in child rearing than other couples have (Kurdek, 2007; Patterson, 1995). Their primary worry as parents concerns the discrimination that they and their children face in society (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004) and their collective need to be selective in disclosing their identity, which can lead them to lead fragmented lives (Connolly, 2006). It is not surprising for lesbians to value identity support, meaning “interactions relevant to a woman’s socially stigmatized identity as a sexual minority person” (Beals & Peplau, 2005, p. 140). Outside the immediate couple, lesbians rely greatly on families of origin, friends, and lesbian parenting groups for social support, though such groups tend to be available mainly in affluent White lesbian circles (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004). Because of the differently gendered nature of lesbian relationships and the social and relational challenges that lesbians face, research should systematically compare the intimate partner support needs and preferences of homosexual versus heterosexual women. Furthermore, efforts to validate our typology must combine race, class, and sexual orientation considerations, given that our sample included predominantly upper-class women. We hope that this study will sustain interest in

the personal-professional experiences of high-achieving women—in particular, the man behind the executive woman.

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