

DISENTANGLING DIRECT AND INDIRECT GENDER EFFECTS ON THE SUPPORTIVE NETWORK

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Supportive relationships do not just happen. They have to be made; made to start, made to work, maintained, and kept alive. The creation of supportive relationships requires skills and abilities, careful adjustments, and constant monitoring of one's own and the other person's behavior. People differ in the skills they have and in the opportunities they have to use these skills. Gender is often considered to be among the sources of these differences. Most men and women move in different social worlds, presenting different opportunities for social interaction. Stereotypes suggest that women are more oriented towards empathy and nurturance in their social involvements than men are. Not surprisingly, therefore, many surveys on the determinants of supportive networks have included gender as one of the explanatory variables. The evidence on gender effects is mixed, however: The effects are not always in the same direction or they are not found at all.

A number of surveys have examined differences in *network size*. Of those involving samples of men and women in all stages of the life cycle, three found that women generally had larger networks than men (Babchuk 1978-79; Lowenthal, Thurnher and Chiriboga 1975; Veroff, Douvan and Kulka 1981), while one (Fischer and Oliner 1983) found that men and women had equivalent network sizes. The latter survey reported gender differences that were linked with age and life cycle stage: Young married men were found to have larger networks than young married women, but among older married adults the reverse was true.

Other surveys have focused on relationships with *friends*. Booth's (1972) findings, based on a sample of men and women in mid and late life, were that married men had more friends than married women. Spouseless men had fewer friends than spouseless women. However, women's relationships with friends were reported to be richer in spontaneity and intimacy. Two studies conducted among the elderly also reported gender differences in the number of friends, but in contrast with Booth's study, these differences were not linked with the presence or absence of a spouse. Men, regardless of marital status, interacted with a larger number of friends;

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women had more intimate friends and interacted with their friends more often (Pihlblad and Adams 1972; Powers and Bultena 1976).

Several studies have examined gender differences in *confidant* relationships. Survey results indicated that women, regardless of marital status, were more likely than men to report having several confidants (Babchuk 1978-79; Blau 1973; Fischer and Phillips 1982). These differences were more pronounced among older adults than among younger adults. Studies based on samples of middle-aged and older adults revealed that married men were most likely to confide in their wives, while married women were not equally likely to confide in their husbands (Antonucci and Akiyama 1987; Lowenthal and Haven 1968). These studies indicated that women relied on a more extensive network of family and friends for confidant support. Findings on married adults of 50 years and older, reported by Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton (1985), showed that women were not only less likely to report receiving emotional support such as confiding and reassurance from their husbands but also less likely to report providing their husbands with emotional support. In explaining their findings, the authors suggested that men and women may have different perceptions of support: Women may use stricter criteria in defining marital interactions as supportive.

Explaining gender effects

What accounts for the findings indicating opposite gender differences or a lack of differences is not yet clear. As Vaux (1985) points out in his review article, it is difficult to isolate the effects of gender on supportive networks from the effects of variables such as age, ethnicity, social role, and socioeconomic status. Basically, there are two approaches to the explanation of gender differences in supportive networks. The first approach focuses on *structural* factors, that is, on differences in the opportunities and constraints to form and maintain relationships as a result of the different positions men and women typically occupy in our society. Given the constraints imposed by childcare and homemaking, women are assumed to have fewer opportunities than men for social contacts outside the family. In addition, mothers, because of their greater involvement in bringing up and caring for children, are more likely than fathers to develop intimate ties with their children. Previous evidence indicating that gender differences are linked with structural factors includes studies by Longino and Lipman (1981) and Kohen (1983). Middle-aged and older married and spouseless women were found to rely more on their children and other family members for support than were their male counterparts. The authors argued that these differences were the continuation of relationship patterns that had been established at an earlier age.

The second approach emphasizes differences in *dispositions* and interpersonal skills that are the result of socialization practices (Chodorow 1978; Dinnerstein 1977; Rubin 1983). The basic premise of this approach is that the experience of the relationship with the primary caregiver (the mother) creates a model for future interpersonal relationships. According to Chodorow, men and women strive to reestablish the emotional and physical bond with the mother in their adult relationships. Because they have different relational needs and relational orientations, men

and women do this in different ways. The differences in needs and orientations are the result of differences in early psychological development. In order to develop an independent sense of self, boys must separate themselves from their mothers. Girls can continue to identify with their mothers. "Girls emerge from this period with a basis of 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not" (Chodorow 1978, p. 167).

According to the same author, women have more complex internal lives than men, and more complex affective needs. The mother remains emotionally primary for women; relationships with men are nonexclusive and secondary. Women seek to recreate the primary emotional bond in relationships with other women. "An exclusive relationship to a man is not enough" (p. 199). Men achieve the return to the mother infant bond in an exclusive heterosexual relationship. They are "supported in this endeavor by women, who, through their own development, have remained open to relational needs, have retained an ongoing inner affective life, and have learned to deny the limitations of masculine lovers for both psychological and practical reasons" (p. 199). Few studies have explicitly examined the effects of gender identity development and gender-role socialization on social support. A study conducted by Burda, Vaux, and Schill (1984) indicated that individuals high in femininity, that is, classified as "feminine" or "androgynous" on the basis of Bem's (1974) Sex Role Inventory, were higher in emotional support and in perceived support from family than were individuals low in femininity, that is, classified as "masculine" or "undifferentiated."

The structural approach and the dispositional approach can lead to opposite predictions, for example, with respect to the involvement in achieved relationships. Achieved relationships, such as relationships with friends, are more likely to be developed by people who can exercise choice in relationships, that is, by people who have the opportunities and personal resources to interact (Palisi and Ransford 1987). Assuming that women have fewer opportunities due to family and household obligations, one expects women to have less involvement in relationships with friends than men. This prediction is suggested by the structural approach. On the other hand, assuming that women have an abundance of personal resources by virtue of their well-socialized virtuosity in relationships, one expects women to have more involvement with friends than men. This prediction is suggested by the dispositional approach. In our view, the operation of such opposing mechanisms may be responsible for the lack of consistency in the findings on gender differences in supportive networks.

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the evidence for this argument. To this end, gender was examined in combination with structural and dispositional factors. By means of this procedure we aimed to disentangle gender effects, that is, to determine to what extent observed differences between the supportive networks of men and women were the result of direct gender effects and of indirect gender effects. The indirect effects referred to differences produced by structural and dispositional factors. The question guiding the study was whether disentangling the direct and the indirect effects on the supportive network would improve our understanding of gender differences.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The present study focused on differences between men and women in their support from nonkin. This variable was chosen as the dependent variable because, as described previously, differences in the effects of structural and dispositional factors are likely to emerge with respect to the involvement in achieved relationships. The first step was to examine whether or not men and women differed in the support received from nonkin relationships. The next step was to examine the influence of structural and dispositional factors. The structural factor under investigation was childcare responsibilities; the dispositional factor concerned relationship standards. The question was whether men and women had different childcare responsibilities and different relationship standards and, subsequently, whether these differences accounted for gender differences in the support received from nonkin.

Not surprisingly, we expected a higher proportion of women than men to be responsible for childcare. Differences in childcare responsibilities were assumed to be associated with differences in nonkin support. Women's greater involvement in childcare presumably restricts their opportunities for establishing relationships outside the family. Following this logic, women were expected to have less nonkin support than men.

Two relationship standards were examined: (1) the standard with respect to the partner relationship and (2) the standard with respect to ties outside that relationship, friends in particular. Because of men's assumed greater proclivity to seek emotional gratification in the exclusive heterosexual relationship, the men's partner standard was expected to be higher on average than the women's partner standard. Because of women's assumed greater proclivity to additionally seek emotional gratification in a wider range of relationships, the women's friendship standard was expected to be higher on average than the men's. We expected differences in relationship standards to be related to differences in the support from nonkin. Men's assumed greater orientation towards intimacy in the partner relationship was expected to deter them from investing energy in other relationships. Following this logic, men were expected to have less support from nonkin than women. As a result of women's greater orientation towards intimacy in a wide range of relationships, women were expected to have more support from nonkin than men.

Respondents

The data were from a survey that was completed in January 1987. The names and addresses of the respondents were obtained by taking aselect samples stratified according to age, gender and marital status from the population registers of two cities in The Netherlands- Haarlem (population approximately 150,000) and Hilversum (population approximately 85,000). The 320 men and women who participated in the study belonged to two age cohorts: 30- to 40-year-olds (126 participants) and 65- to 75-year-olds (194 participants). Within each age cohort, the numbers of men and women officially registered as never married, married, divorced, and widowed were approximately equal. Of the younger respondents, 59 had a partner relationship while 67 did not. Of the older respondents, 60 had a partner relationship while

134 did not. A 'partner' relationship refers to a relationship with a spouse or with a cohabitant.

Of the potential respondents, 43.2% refused to participate, 7.2% were unable to participate (ill, hospitalized, out of the country, etc.), and 10.0% were never reached (never home, wrong address, deceased, institutionalized, etc.). A consideration of a number of factors (for details, see Bethlehem and Kersten 1986) indicates that the response rate is not exceptionally low. These factors concern the topic of the survey (delicate, privacy-sensitive issues), the population under investigation (generally higher refusal rates among the elderly), and the regional location (a disproportionately high number of surveys, marketing surveys in particular, are conducted in the western part of The Netherlands).

Questionnaire

Semistructured interviews, with an average duration of two and a half hours, were conducted in the respondents' homes. The questions concerned demographic characteristics, employment history, housing situation, living arrangement, personal characteristics, desired relationships, achieved relationships, social support, and loneliness.

Measures

Nonkin support. The respondents were requested to provide the names of those persons with whom they interacted most often and who were closest to them. After the names had been provided, the respondents were presented with a list of relationship labels (neighbor, cousin, etc.). They were then asked to assign the appropriate label to each person they had mentioned. If seven or more names had been given, the respondents were requested to select the names of the six persons who were most important to them. Next, a set of questions was asked about each of these (maximally six) persons. Four questions concerned emotional support, and four concerned instrumental support. An example of an item assessing emotional support is: "S/he cares about me." An example of an item assessing instrumental support is: "If necessary, s/he would help me with practical matters such as shopping, transportation, cleaning, household repairs." The eight items formed a unidimensional scale (Loevinger's coefficient of homogeneity was .38 and the rho coefficient of reliability was .75.)

Support from nonkin relationships was calculated in the following manner. Positive answers to each of the eight support questions were summed across the most important persons who were labeled as nonkin. The maximum nonkin support score was 48; this score was obtained if there were six most important persons who were each designated as nonkin and who each provided the eight forms of support. The minimum nonkin support score was 0.

Childcare responsibilities. Our study did not specifically measure the involvement in family duties. Information was only obtained on parental status. Our coding scheme for childcare responsibilities was developed on the basis of results from Dutch time budget surveys (Knulst and Schoonderwoerd 1983). Results on the division of paid and unpaid work between men and women indicate that the partici-

pation of women in household and family duties considerably exceeds that of men: Among married and cohabiting couples, women did most of the cleaning and cooking in 98% of the surveyed households and most of the childcare activities in 95% of the households. In the present study, if the female respondents had children, they were given the score 1 for childcare responsibilities; if they had no children, they were assigned the score 0. Male respondents were given the score 0 for childcare responsibilities unless they currently were single parents (30- to 40-year-olds) or had been single parents (65- to 75-year-olds). In those cases, they were assigned the score 1.

Relationship standards. The respondents were asked to indicate the importance attached to the relationship with a partner and the importance attached to relationships with same-sex friends. It was emphasized during the interview that the importance of the relationships should be considered regardless of whether or not the respondent actually had such relationships. A rating scale was used for the answers, ranging from 1 (totally unimportant) to 6 (absolutely essential).

Causal model

To examine the effects of gender and the effects of structural and dispositional factors on the supportive network, a causal model (see Figure 1) was used that incorporated both direct and indirect effects of gender on the support from nonkin. The indirect effects in the model specified the association between gender and the structural and dispositional factors. Under the assumption that the influence of gender on nonkin support can be attributed to differences in childcaring responsibilities and to differences in relationship standards between men and women, we expected a significant proportion of the *total* effects of gender on nonkin support to be the result of the indirect effects of childcaring responsibilities and relationship standards.

The computer program LISREL (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1986) was used to analyze the data. To facilitate the interpretation of the model, only one-way causal relationships were specified. The manner in which the LISREL analysis was performed in the present study makes it similar to path analysis. Because the literature suggests that gender differences interact with the presence or the absence of a partner relationship, and to avoid confounding between the existence of a partner relationship and the "partner relationship standard," the model was tested separately for the respondents with and the respondents without a partner. Gender was coded as male (0) and female (1).

RESULTS

In response to the question about the persons with whom they interacted most frequently and who were closest to them, men named an average of 9.3 ($n = 161$, $SD = 7.2$) relationships, while women named an average of 9.5 ($n = 159$, $SD = 6.5$) relationships. The difference was not significant ($t = -.36$). Among the men, an

Table 1: Gender Differences in Support from Nonkin, Childcare Responsibilities, and Relationship Standards^a.

	Without a Partner		<i>t</i>	With a Partner		<i>t</i>
	Male (<i>n</i> = 94)	Female (<i>n</i> = 105)		Male (<i>n</i> = 68)	Female (<i>n</i> = 53)	
Nonkin support	11.48 (11.26)	12.82 (11.26)	-.84	9.24 (10.76)	8.96 (9.79)	.14
Childcare responsibilities	.20 (.40)	.60 (.49)	-6.33*	-	.81 (.40)	
Partner standard	4.32 (1.58)	3.60 (1.63)	3.14*	5.29 (1.04)	5.25 (.90)	.27
Friendship standard	3.93 (1.37)	4.44 (1.11)	-2.96*	4.09 (1.12)	4.42 (.82)	-1.79

^a The standard deviations are provided in parentheses. The range of the childcare responsibilities scores is 0 (no) to 1 (yes). The range of the relationship standard scores is 1 (low) to 6 (high).

* $p < .01$.

average of 4.1 ($SD = 4.1$) and among the women an average of 4.4 ($SD = 4.1$) of these relationships were designated as nonkin. Again, the difference was not significant ($t = -.54$). Men and women did not differ significantly in the mean support received from nonkin ($t = -.81$). The means were 10.55 ($SD = 11.01$) and 11.54 ($SD = 10.92$), respectively. These means mask differences that exist between specific categories of respondents. Table 1 shows the results broken down by partner status.

A gender difference in support from nonkin was found among the respondents without a partner. On average, men without a partner received less nonkin support than women without a partner did. As Table 1 indicates, men without a partner were less likely to be responsible for childcare than were women without a partner. Of the women with a partner, 81% were responsible for childcare. (Our coding scheme had specified that men with a partner had no childcare responsibilities.) Table 1 also shows that men without a partner generally attached less importance to relationships with friends and relatively more importance to the partner relationship than women without a partner did. No significant gender differences in relationship standards were revealed for the respondents with a partner.

LISREL analysis. The matrices of the correlations between the variables that served as input for the LISREL analysis are presented in Table 2. For both the respondents with and the respondents without a partner, the total effect of gender on the support from nonkin was negligible. The total effect was .06 for the respondents with a partner and -.01 for the respondents with a partner.

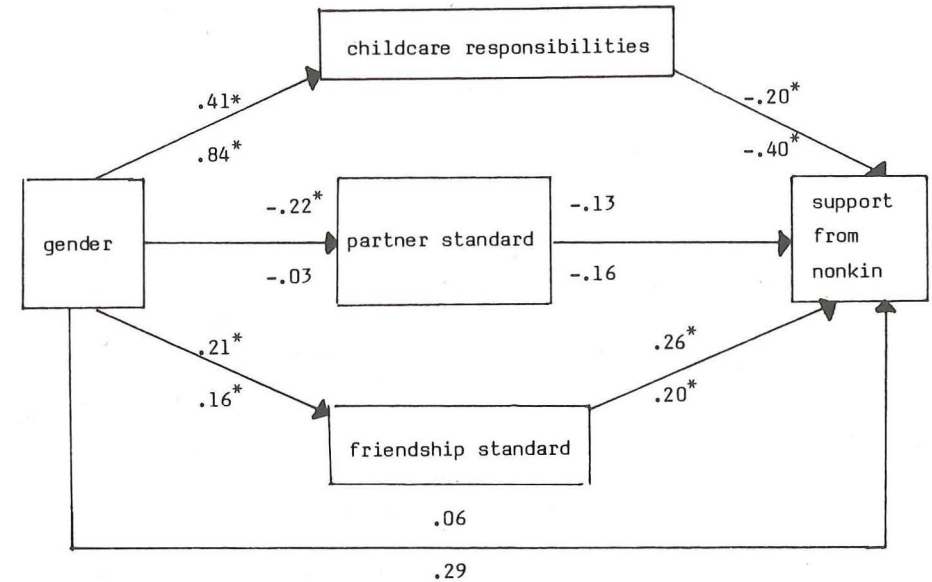
Table 2: Correlation Matrices of the Variables Involved in the LISREL Analysis.

Respondents without a Partner (n = 201)					
	Gender	Childcare Responsibilities	Partner Standard	Friendship Standard	Nonkin Support
Gender	1.00				
Childcare responsibilities	.41	1.00			
Partner standard	-.22	.06	1.00		
Friendship standard	.21	.08	-.04	1.00	
Nonkin support	.06	-.16	-.16	.26	1.00

Respondents with a Partner (n = 119)					
	Gender	Childcare Responsibilities	Partner Standard	Friendship Standard	Nonkin Support
Gender	1.00				
Childcare responsibilities	.84	1.00			
Partner standard	-.03	.04	1.00		
Friendship standard	.16	.17	.25	1.00	
Nonkin support	-.01	-.13	-.13	.14	1.00

As Figure 1 indicates, among the respondents without a partner, the *direct* effect of gender on nonkin support was very weak; among the respondents with a partner the direct effect appeared to be quite sizable but was not significant (due to a relatively large standard error of the parameter). Inspection of the figure reveals the presence of opposing *indirect* effects. The childcare responsibilities were positively predicted by gender but produced a negative effect on nonkin support; the resulting indirect effect was negative (-.08 for the respondents without a partner and -.34 for the respondents with a partner). The friendship standard was positively predicted by gender and produced a positive effect on the number of nonkin; the resulting indirect effect was positive (.03 for the respondents without a partner and .01 for the respondents with a partner). The partner standard was negatively predicted by gender and produced a negative (but weak) effect on the number of nonkin; the resulting indirect effect was positive (.05 for the respondents with a partner and .03 for the respondents without a partner). The indirect effects taken together produced a zero effect for the respondents without a partner and an effect of .29 for the respondents

Figure 1: Direct and Indirect Effects of Gender on the Support from Nonkin^a.



^a The top number of each pair is the standardized regression coefficient for the respondents without a partner; the bottom number is the coefficient for the respondents with a partner. *significant, $t > 1.96$

with a partner. The *total* effect is the result of the indirect effects and the direct effect, that is, among the respondents without a partner there was an indirect effect of .00 and a direct effect of .06, and among the respondents with a partner there was an indirect effect of -.30 and a direct effect of .29.

DISCUSSION

A comparison of men as a category with women as a category leaves one guessing about the mechanisms underlying observed gender effects. For this reason, the present study followed a procedure that provided a means of disentangling underlying effects: The effects of gender were examined together with the effects of variables that were assumed to be connected with gender, namely, responsibilities for childcare and relationship standards. Using a causal model, we were able to demonstrate that what appeared overall to be the absence of a gender effect was actually the product of opposing gender-related mechanisms.

Differences between men and women with respect to childcare responsibilities and with respect to relationship standards accounted for gender differences in the support received from nonkin, but in opposite ways. Respondents with childcare

responsibilities (likely to be women) received less support from nonkin than did respondents without those responsibilities. Respondents who attached relatively much importance to friends (likely to be women) or relatively little importance to the partner relationship (also likely to be women) received more nonkin support than did those who attached relatively little importance to friends or relatively much importance to the partner relationship. These effects were observed among both respondents with and respondents without a partner, although they were generally quite weak. The direct and indirect gender effects did not account for much of the variation in nonkin support.

The results support the suggestion that the lack of consistency in the findings on gender differences in the literature can be attributed to the operation of opposing gender-related effects. Conceivably, the differences between men and women in some samples are primarily influenced by differences in structural factors; in other samples the influence of dispositional factors predominates; and in still other samples the influences of both factors prevail. Fischer and Oliner (1983) have put forward similar views. They argued that women are more sensitive to personal relationships than men but that women's material circumstances do not always provide them with the opportunities to express their disposition.

The present study actually specified some of the factors that were assumed to contribute to differences between men and women in supportive relationships. Our analysis of the structural and dispositional factors underlying gender differences can be applied to other population categories: younger vs. older adults, high socioeconomic status people vs. low socioeconomic status people, divorced individuals vs. widowed individuals, and so forth. In our view, future research on the factors that affect the development of relationships among different populations should more closely examine differences in the opportunities for social contacts, differences in the desire for social contacts, and the interaction between the two factors. Questions that can be explored are why people in similar objective circumstances have different supportive networks and why people with similar relationship standards have different supportive networks. More attention needs to be directed towards understanding when people are, and when people are not, able to realize their desire for social contacts. Research on supportive networks will benefit from an integrative approach that takes into account both the structural factors and the dispositional factors that shape people's behavior in personal relationships.

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