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Observed Support Provision in Couples:  
The Influence of Biological Sex and Gender Identity

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The widely accepted *marital support gap hypothesis* says that women receive less support from their spouses than men, and that the support they receive is less helpful than what they provide to their husbands (Belle, 1982). However, numerous observational studies failed to detect differences between husbands and wives in the amount of emotional support (e.g., reassurance, comfort), instrumental support (e.g., advice, assistance), and unhelpful/negative types of support (e.g., minimizing problem, ignoring support seeker's view) they provide to their support-seeking spouse (e.g., Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Ickes, 2007).

It should be noted, however, that these studies focused exclusively on *biological sex* differences (male vs. female) in observed support provision, thereby overlooking the role of spouses' *gender identity*. It could, however, be expected that the extent to which a spouse possesses *masculine qualities* (e.g., self-reliant, independent, competitive) or *feminine qualities* (e.g., warm, understanding, compassionate) may have an effect on his/her way of providing support to a partner in distress.

We assumed that individual differences in spousal support provision are subtle and depend on an *interaction of biological sex and gender identity*. More specifically, we expected differences between husbands and wives in the way they support each other, but only for spouses with traditional sex-typed orientations (husbands characterized as "masculine" versus wives characterized as "feminine").

Fifty married couples participated in an observational laboratory study. They provided questionnaire data and participated in two 10-min support interaction tasks, designed to assess each spouse's support provision behavior. The videotaped interactions were subsequently coded for emotional, instrumental, and unhelpful/negative support provision behavior and

proportions were computed (see Social Support Interaction Coding System; Bradbury & Pasch, 1992). The Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) was used to determine husbands' (masculine husbands:  $n = 24$ ; other:  $n = 26$ ) and wives' (feminine wives:  $n = 23$ ; other:  $n = 27$ ) gender identity (double median split procedure).

The repeated measures ANOVA's revealed a significant Biological Sex  $\times$  Husbands' Gender Identity  $\times$  Wives' Gender Identity interaction for observed *instrumental support*,  $F(1, 46) = 3.77, p = .05$ . Wives provided more instrumental support to their husbands than vice versa, but this was only so for feminine wives compared to masculine husbands ( $F(1, 12) = 19.46, p = .001$ ;  $M_{\text{feminine wives}} = .22$ ;  $M_{\text{masculine husbands}} = .09$ ). Husbands and wives who were not traditionally gender stereotyped did not differ in the amount of observed instrumental support provision. Furthermore, the Biological Sex  $\times$  Husbands' Gender Identity interaction was significant for observed *negative support*,  $F(1, 46) = 9.50, p = .003$ , with husbands reacting more negatively to their support seeking partner than wives. However, this was only so for masculine husbands ( $F(1, 23) = 7.68, p = .011$ ;  $M_{\text{masculine husbands}} = .17$ ;  $M_{\text{wives}} = .07$ ). No main effects or interaction effects reached significance for observed *emotional support*.

These results indicate that support provision within marriage depends on the interaction of spouses' biological sex and gender identity, at least for instrumental and unhelpful types of support. Our findings suggest that the marital support gap may only become visible when support is solicited and provided within couples in which at least one spouse is traditionally sex-typed. Replication of these findings with samples that are larger will be important.

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