Increasing Emotional Support in Males

Sophia Makal

Carnegie Mellon University

Abstract

Previous research on emotional support provision has often shown that women are more willing to give emotional support than men, but little work has been done to understand why this occurs or how to eliminate the gender difference. The present study explored the theory that providing emotional support is a threat to males' masculinity, self-esteem, and/or self-integrity, causing the gender difference in emotional support provision. This study also examined possible means of decreasing feelings of threat in males, and ultimately increasing emotional support provision, through the use of self-affirmation (affirming the self by thinking about one's important values) and security priming (increasing feelings of attachment security by thinking about one's secure relationships). Participants in an online study (M age = 48.62 years) were randomly assigned to a self-affirmation, security prime, or control condition prior to imagining themselves in a scenario involving a friend in a difficult situation and in need of emotional support. Participants then reported feelings of masculinity, self-esteem, and self-integrity, and completed self-report and behavioral measures of emotional support provision. Results partially supported hypotheses by revealing a marginal condition x gender interaction predicting self-reported emotional support, such that females in the control condition reported more emotional support than males, but the gender difference was eliminated in the security priming condition. There were no significant effects for the behavioral measure of emotional support provision, the proposed mechanisms, or the self-affirmation manipulation. Implications of results are discussed.

Increasing Emotional Support in Males

Social support (i.e. the various types of assistance or help that people receive from others) is one of the many benefits that can be reaped from having close relationships (Seeman, 2008). However, the psychological literature suggests that not all social support affords equal benefits, both in terms of type of support (emotional vs. instrumental) and support provider (female vs. male). Specifically, evidence has shown that emotional support can be helpful in most any situation, including those in which instrumental support is not helpful (Dunkel-Schetter, 1984; Adams, King, & King, 1996; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Additionally, the support that females provide has been shown, in a variety of circumstances, to be more beneficial than support provided by their male counterparts (Barbee, Gulley, & Cunningham, 1990; Samter, 2009; Matthewson, Burton-Smith, & Montgomery, 2011; Scholz et al., 2011).

It should be noted, however, that these two findings are not completely coincidental or independent; though the psychological literature is mixed, there have been many studies showing that females provide more emotional support than males (MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, Clark, 2003; MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004; Samter, 2009). If emotional support is perceived as more consistently beneficial than instrumental support, and if females provide more emotional support than males, then support provided by females may be more beneficial than that provided by males. The goal of the present study was to examine means of reducing the gender-gap in emotional support provision, such that males are as emotionally supportive as females. A second goal was to understand the mechanisms or processes by which the gender gap occurs.

Emotional vs. Instrumental Support

Before we can understand why emotional support may be more beneficial than instrumental support, we must understand what each entails. Emotional support refers to the things that people do that make us feel loved and cared for, that bolster our sense of self-worth, and that take the form of non-tangible types of assistance (Seeman, 2008). That is, emotional support is aimed at helping someone to feel better emotionally. Examples of emotional support include providing encouragement, complimenting, providing reassurance, and providing affectionate physical touch like a hug. Instrumental support, on the other hand, is focused on problem-resolution and refers to the various types of tangible assistance that others may provide, for example help with housekeeping, provision of transportation, provision of money, etc. (Seeman, 2008).

As these different forms of support include very different behaviors that are aimed at addressing different support needs, it follows that they would produce different outcomes. For example, in her study of 79 cancer patients, Dunkel-Schetter (1984) found that, of all of the types of support measured (including emotional, instrumental, and informational), emotional support was seen as exceptionally helpful to patients. Additionally, emotional support was found to be helpful regardless of provider, which included health professionals, friends, and family members (Dunkel-Schetter, 1984).

Research by Adams et al. (1996) further supports the idea that emotional support can have benefits above instrumental support in their study of the effects of job and family involvement, family social support, and work-family conflict on job and life satisfaction. These researchers found that higher levels of family involvement in one's life were associated with higher levels of emotional support receipt from family members (Adams et al., 1996). Greater emotional support from family members, in turn, had a positive relationship with life

satisfaction, such that receiving more emotional support was associated with more life

satisfaction (Adams et al., 1996). The same pattern was not found for instrumental support;

emotional support was related to life satisfaction, whereas instrumental support was not.

More recently, Malecki and Demaray (2003) conducted a study on how different types of

support (emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental) from various sources (parents,

teachers, peers) can affect school adjustment and outcomes of 5th to 8th graders. Results showed

that emotional support that students perceived from their teachers was the sole predictor of

students' social skills and academic competence (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). These results,

along with those of the aforementioned studies, indicate not only that emotional support is more

beneficial, in many cases, than instrumental support, but also that it is beneficial from a variety

of providers, including teachers, health professionals, friends, family members, etc. The present

study will specifically investigate emotional support provision in close friendships.

Females vs. Males

Much like there has been research to show that emotional support can be more beneficial

than instrumental, there also has been research indicating that social support provided by females

can be more beneficial, in a variety of situations, than that provided by males. In her study of

how cognitive complexity affects the ability to provide skillful comfort, Samter (2009) found

that females used significantly more skillful comforting (emotional support provision) than

males. Additionally, further analysis showed that cognitive complexity only accounted for one

third of the sex difference in comforting skill, indicating that, regardless of their cognitive

complexity, females were still able to comfort significantly more skillfully than males (Samter,

2009). Further evidence can be found in Scholz et al.'s (2011) study of how differences in social

support provision by gender affect adherence to recovery medication in organ transplant patients.

These researchers found that social support (including adherence-specific, emotional, and instrumental support) provided by women was positively related to patients' intention to adhere to organ transplant recovery medication, while support provided by men was slightly negatively related to the intention to adhere (Scholz et al., 2011). In both of these cases, social support provided by females was found to be more beneficial, whether in regard to skillful comforting or recovery adherence, than support provided by males.

The psychological literature, however, has also provided examples of how females' support provision is superior to males' with regard to subjective perceptions of the support behavior by recipients. In their study of how both parent and child gender affects social support provision and perception, Matthewson, Burton-Smith, and Montgomery (2011) found that children of both genders reported greater satisfaction with their mothers' overall social support (including both emotional and instrumental support) than their fathers'. Additionally, and most relevant to the present study, Barbee, Gulley, and Cunningham (1990) found, in their study of how support seeking in close friendships differs between genders, that both males and females expect their male friends to use dismissive behaviors rather than provide social support in response to their problems, especially emotional ones. Taken together, these studies provide strong evidence to support the notion that social support provided by females is often more beneficial than social support provided by males.

The Gender Gap

But what is it about social support provided by females that produces these added benefits? As previously noted, the psychological literature often shows that females provide more emotional support than males, who typically provide instrumental support (Barbee et al., 1990; Hall, 2010; MacGeorge et al., 2003; MacGeorge et al., 2004; Samter, 2009). For example,

Barbee et al. (1990) found that, in friendships, women expect to give emotional support, while men expect to give instrumental support. Additionally, both men and women expect to receive emotional support from their female friends, but they expect to receive instrumental support from their male friends (Barbee et al., 1990). Since emotional support has been shown to have many benefits beyond those that instrumental support can offer, it follows that support provided by females, which largely consists of emotional support, would be more beneficial than that provided by males, which largely consists of instrumental support.

It must be noted, however, that the psychological literature on the gender gap in emotional support provision is somewhat mixed. Many studies have supported the notion that women are more emotionally supportive than men, including MacGeorge et al.'s (2003) study of how differential motivation between genders may contribute to the gender difference. In this study, participants were asked to produce emotional support messages in response to various scenarios, and responses were then coded for emotional sensitivity (with greater emotional sensitivity indicating better emotional support). In all scenarios, females produced messages exhibiting greater emotional sensitivity than those of males, indicating that females were giving better emotional support than males (MacGeorge et al., 2003). Additionally, in a later study by MacGeorge et al. (2004) that actually aimed to disprove the gender difference in emotional support provision, it was found that, though the differences were small, men gave advice (a form of instrumental support) proportionately more often than women, and women were proportionately more likely than men to provide support by affirming the other and offering intangible help (forms of emotional support). Though these results may not have been what the authors had hoped, they do offer further evidence that women provide more emotional support than men, while men provide more instrumental support.

On the other hand, some studies have reported finding no gender differences in emotional

support provision. In a study on the relationship between gender, negative affectivity, and social

support provision in married couples by Pasch, Bradbury, and Davilla (1997), 60 newly married

couples engaged in videotaped interactions. In each interaction, one spouse was known as the

helper, whose behaviors were coded for social support behaviors, while the partner, the helpee,

discussed a personal problem. Analysis of these interactions revealed that husbands and wives

did not differ in helper behaviors, meaning that females and males were giving equal amounts of

emotional and instrumental support. In addition, a similar study by Mickelson, Helgeson, and

Weiner (1995) both observed participants during a problem-sharing discussion like the one

described above, and had them self-report their social support behaviors following the

discussion. Much like Pasch et al.'s (1997) results, in analyzing the observed behavioral data,

females did not give more emotional support than males, providing evidence against the gender

difference in emotional support provision. However, in analyzing the self-report data, females

reported giving more emotional support than males, in this case supporting the gender difference

(Mickelson et al., 1995).

Verhofstadt, Buysse, and Ickes (2007) found almost identical results in their two studies,

both including self-report and behavioral measures, regarding gender differences in social

support provision in married couples. In accordance with Mickelson et al. (1995), for their self-

report measures in both studies, wives displayed higher levels of emotional support than their

husbands, once again following the typical gender difference (Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Ickes,

2007). However, in accordance with the results of Mickelson et al. (1995), for their behavioral

measures there was no significant gender difference in emotional support provision (Verhofstadt,

Buysse, & Ickes, 2007). This paradox between self-report and behavioral data is where much of

the confusion in the psychological literature regarding the gender difference in emotional support

provision lies. For this reason, the present study will analyze both self-report and behavioral

measures of emotional support provision. Despite the fact that literature regarding the gender gap

in emotional support provision is mixed, there is still plenty of evidence that emotional support

can be more beneficial than other types of social support. Therefore, even if males and females

do provide equal amounts of emotional support as some behavioral assessments suggest,

increasing its provision is still a top priority, as it is almost always beneficial to recipients.

Mediating Factors

Though the literature on the gender difference in emotional support provision may be

mixed, there is enough evidence, in conjunction with the evidence that emotional support is more

beneficial than instrumental, and that support provision from females is more beneficial than

from males, to warrant further investigation of why it occurs and how to combat it. To date, there

has been little said in the psychological literature explicitly regarding *why* the gender difference

occurs in emotional support provision, other than speculations regarding gender-role

socialization. The present study aims to fill this information gap in order to ultimately close the

gender gap. We posit that providing emotional support, especially when it is salient (for instance,

when participants have to self-report their behaviors), engenders some sort of threat to males.

Accordingly, this threat, whatever it may be, could be a mediating factor in the relationship

between gender and emotional support provision. To better understand this possible mediating

pathway, we have posited that providing emotional support may be threatening to males'

masculinity, self-esteem, and/or self-integrity.

Masculinity. Most of the current psychological literature regarding why males are less

likely than females to provide emotional support revolves around gender-role socialization. Put

simply, males are socialized to be masculine and behave in masculine ways, while females are socialized to be feminine and behave as such. A large part of what is considered feminine revolves around emotions—being emotional, being attune to others' emotions, and being emotionally supportive. Therefore, providing emotional support is often seen as a feminine behavior. In fact, in their study of how biological sex (male and female) and gender role identity (masculine and feminine) predict support provision in married couples, Verhofstadt and Weytens (2013) found no differences between biological males and females in support provision behavior (i.e. giving emotional support vs. instrumental support). Interestingly, however, masculine individuals reported providing higher levels of instrumental and unhelpful support to their spouses in distress, while feminine individuals reported providing higher levels of emotional support (Verhofstadt & Weytens, 2013). These results provide evidence for the notion that masculinity may play a mediating role in the relationship between gender and emotional support provision. In the present study, we predict that a situation that calls for the provision of emotional support may be a threat to males' masculinity, leading to their lower emotional support provision.

   Self-esteem. The psychological research shows that for males, feelings of masculinity are linked to feelings of self-esteem. In their study of the effects of masculinity priming on self-esteem, Wong et al. (2015) found that male participants who received masculinity priming reported higher feelings of self-esteem than those in the control priming condition. These findings indicate that higher feelings of masculinity, for males, are associated with higher feelings of self-esteem, and, conversely, that lower feelings of masculinity are associated with lower feelings of self-esteem. As such, it follows that a threat to masculinity would also serve as a threat to self-esteem. Because of this association, we predict that self-esteem may be yet

another mediator in the relationship between gender and emotional support provision, such that providing emotional support may be a threat to male's self-esteem, resulting in lower emotional support provision.

Self-integrity. The final proposed mediator in the relationship between gender and emotional support provision is an overarching feeling that supersedes both masculinity and self-esteem, known as self-integrity. According to Sherman and Hartson (2011), whose research aims to improve feelings of self-integrity, it is neither simply feelings of self-esteem nor positivity toward the self, but a feeling regarding the quality of the entire "self-system." This self-system is composed of the different domains that are important to an individual—including roles, values, social identities, and belief systems—which could involve both masculinity and self-esteem, but is not limited to them (Sherman & Hartson, 2011). However, when any one of the parts of this global self-system are threatened, it threatens the entire system. Thus, we predict that the threat to self-integrity is another possible mediator of the link between gender and emotional support provision. Specifically, we predict that providing emotional support may be a threat to males' self-integrity, leading to their lower emotional support provision.

How to Increase Emotional Support Provision in Males

Self-affirmation. If masculinity, self-esteem, and/or self-integrity are mediators of the link between gender and emotional support provision, the question then becomes how can these feelings be increased in males under threat enough to elicit greater willingness to give emotional support? The growing literature on self-affirmation, or affirming oneself by thinking about important personal values, suggests that self-affirmation interventions may be an effective tool to minimize the gender difference in emotional support provision (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). These interventions may be especially helpful in reducing any potential threats associated with giving

emotional support, as they specifically address the need to maintain one's self-integrity, one of our proposed mediators (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Self-affirmation interventions combat potential threats by making people aware of their positive qualities and capabilities, typically by having them write or think about their important personal values (McQueen & Klein, 2006). Attending to positive attributes that are unrelated to the immediate threat broadens one's perspective beyond that threat, such that tools to overcome it are more salient and available (Sherman & Hartson, 2011).

The positive effects of self-affirmation interventions are broad and well documented. In their review of self-affirmation experimental manipulations, McQueen and Klein (2006) revealed that self-affirmation manipulations of various types have positive effects on attitude change after dissonance arousal and acceptance of counter-attitudinal arguments, as well as on reductions in prejudice, downward comparisons, and external attributions of others' behavior. Self-affirmation interventions have also been tested on more specific outcomes, for example, reducing the self-stigma associated with seeking psychotherapy. Lannin, Guyll, Vogel, and Madon (2013) used a self-affirmation manipulation in a sample of undergraduate students undergoing psychological distress. Their results showed that participating in a self-affirmation manipulation lead not only to lower self-stigma for experiencing psychological distress, but also resulted in a positive effect on willingness to seek psychotherapy (Lannin et al., 2013). These results indicate that self-affirmation interventions can influence feelings about the self, which, in turn, can affect behaviors.

A study by Cohen et al. (2016) showed that these self-affirmation effects can be lasting. Participants in this study were183 Latino and White students in their first or second year of college. At the start of the study, participants either completed a self-affirmation manipulation or

a control task, and they were then followed for 2 years. Results showed that the single self-affirmation given at the study's onset improved the grade point average of Latino students over 2 years (Cohen et al., 2016). Additional evidence indicated that these GPA benefits occurred, in part, because the self-affirmation shifted the way Latino students naturally responded to subsequent stressors (Cohen et al., 2016). Thus, these results indicate that self-affirmation interventions can not only have immediate positive benefits, but can actually alter patterns of thinking to be beneficial in the long-term.

Despite all of the evidence regarding the positive effects of self-affirmation, evidence is sparse regarding its effects on behavior and behavioral intentions (McQueen & Klein, 2006). Additionally, no prior research to our knowledge has examined the effects of self-affirmation interventions on willingness to provide and/or actual provision of social support. Because we believe that giving emotional support engenders some sort of threat to males, and there is strong evidence showing that self-affirmation interventions are effective at reducing the effects of outside threats, the present study will use a self-affirmation manipulation to decrease feelings of threat (to masculinity, self-esteem, and/or self-integrity) in male participants, in attempts to ultimately increase their emotional support provision.

Attachment Security Priming. Although there is no current evidence showing that self-affirmation may be able to directly change males' actual emotional support behaviors, the same cannot be said for another psychological intervention, known as attachment security priming (or security priming). Security priming aims to increase feelings of attachment security, which is a sense that the world is generally safe, that attachment figures (e.g. mother, father, caretaker, etc.) are helpful when called upon, and that it is possible to explore the environment and engage with new and other people (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Security priming increases the perception

that an attachment figure is available, often by having a person think about his or her responsive

and supportive attachment figures or recall memories of supportive interactions with these

people (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Feelings of attachment figure availability reduce distress

and increase positive mood, helping people to overcome potential stressors and threats

(Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Much like with self-affirmation, having the ability to reduce potential threats makes

security priming a potential tool for reducing feelings of threat in males related to emotional

support provision (i.e., threat to masculinity, self-esteem, or self-integrity). However, there is

evidence in the psychological literature to indicate that security priming may be especially

effective at increasing emotional support provision. Specifically, experiencing a security prime is

thought to make people feel more secure (e.g., safe, loved), have more positive relational

expectations, and experience greater empathy and behave more prosocially than nonprimed

individuals (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016). The latter outcomes are most pertinent to the present

study, as empathy and prosocial behavior are both crucial aspects of thoughtful social support

provision: without empathy, one would be less able understand what type of social support

another person needs, and without the willingness to behave prosocially, one would be less likely

to support another person in general. Many studies have explored these and similar effects, the

majority of which have been encouraging.

For example, in their study regarding the effects of security priming on concerns for

others' welfare, Mikulincer, Gillath, Sapir-Lavid, Yaakobi, Arias, Tal-Aloni, and Bor (2003)

found that security priming was associated with heightened endorsement of the self-

transcendence values of benevolence (preservation and enhancement of the welfare of close

persons) and universalism (understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection of the welfare

of all people). These results indicate that security priming can lead to increased attention to and

caring about others' welfare, both of which are important for providing effective social support.

Further, in their review of recent experimental studies of security priming, Mikulincer and

Shaver (2007) reveal that security priming has been shown not only to increase people's feelings

of compassion towards others in need, but also to actually increase people's willingness to help a

person in need. These researchers suggest not only that security priming increases people's care

for others, but that it also motivates them to act upon that care.

In sum, the aforementioned studies indicate that security priming may be an effective tool

to decrease feelings of threat, as well as to increase care for and helping behaviors toward others.

Therefore, because situations calling for the provision of emotional support is thought to be a

threat to males, and because the provision of emotional support is an integral part of helping

others, the present study will utilize a security prime manipulation in an attempt to decrease

feelings of threat (to masculinity, self-esteem, and/or self-integrity) in male participants and

increase their emotional support provision.

Hypotheses

Despite the fact that emotional support has been shown in a variety of circumstances to

be the most beneficial type of social support across a variety of situations, there continues to be

evidence (albeit mixed) that males lack in their emotional support provision as compared to

females. In order to better understand why this occurs and how to combat it, we have posited that

providing emotional support engenders some sort of threat to males, specifically a threat to their

masculinity, self-esteem, and/or self-integrity. Additionally, we propose that two psychological

interventions—self-affirmation and security priming—may be effective tools to protect males

against these potential threats, thereby making them more willing to provide emotional support.

Thus, the present study will test the following hypotheses:

I. Females that do not complete one of the experimental manipulations—self-affirmation

or security prime—will provide more emotional support than males who do not

complete one of the manipulations.

II. Male participants who complete one of the experimental manipulations will

provide as much emotional support as females, and more emotional support than

males who do not complete one of the manipulations.

III. Male participants who complete one of the experimental manipulations will

have higher feelings of self-esteem, masculinity, and self-integrity than males who

do not complete one of the manipulations.

Method

Sample

Participants were 166 adults (93 females and 73 males) aged 18-81, with a mean age of

48.62 years (SD = 18.18 years). Participants were recruited using an online survey research

platform known as Qualtrics, which not only allows users to create their own online surveys, but

also recruits participants from different panel companies for them.

Though each panel company has its own method of recruitment, all are fairly similar.

Typically, individuals are invited to join a panel through online ads, and can choose to join

through a double opt-in process, by which the individual registers for the panel, and then

receives an email containing a link that they must click to verify their registration. Upon

registration, they enter some basic data about themselves, including demographic information,

hobbies, interests, etc. Whenever a survey is created that a registered individual would qualify

for, based on the information they have given and the survey's exclusion criteria, they are

notified via email and invited to participate in the survey for a given incentive. The email

invitation is generic, with no specifics as to the topic of the survey itself; individuals are simply

told that they qualify for a survey, told the duration of the survey, given the survey link, and told

to follow the link if they would like to participate for the given incentive.

In the case of the present study, exclusion criteria for participants included that they be

18 years or older and speak fluent English, and the incentive for participation was a small

monetary reward. Additionally, prior to beginning the study all participants indicated by

choosing either "Yes" or "No" that they were over the age of 18, had read and understood the

provided informed consent document regarding the study's purpose, procedures, etc., and agreed

to participate in the study.

Design

To examine gender differences in emotional support behaviors, why the difference

occurs, and how to eliminate it, the study utilized a 3 x 2 between-subjects design with

experimental condition (self-affirmation, security prime, control) and gender (male, female) as

independent variables. Participant gender was reported at the onset of the study through a

demographics questionnaire, and participants were randomly assigned to one of the three

experimental conditions—self-affirmation ($N = 50$), security prime ($N = 54$), and control ($N =$

62)—before the study began. The dependent variables—assessments of emotional support—

were measured through questionnaires during the study, along with the hypothesized mediating

variables of state self-integrity, self-esteem, and masculinity.

Procedure

Background Information. First, participants completed a series of questionnaires to provide personal background information, including general demographics such as gender, age, race, religion, education level, and occupation. They then completed a modified 24-item version of the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR: α = .947) to assess their dispositional attachment security. This was assessed to ensure randomization of dispositional security across conditions (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). If randomization was successful, the average dispositional attachment security of participants in each experimental group should not be significantly different from the others. Finally, as a set up for later parts of the study, participants were asked to give the initials of their closest friend (with whom they were not in an intimate relationship), and to imagine and describe that close friend.

Experimental Manipulations. After describing their closest friend, participants completed one of the three manipulations—self-affirmation, security prime, or control.

Self-affirmation. Participants who were randomly assigned to the self-affirmation condition completed a written self-affirmation intervention as described by McQueen and Klein (2006). Participants were asked to rank, from 1 (most important) to 12 (least important), a series of 12 common values in terms of how personally important each value was to them. The list of values included items such as sense of humor, relations with friends and family, athletics, etc. Of the 50 participants in the self-affirmation condition, 40% ranked sense of humor as their most important value, 26% ranked relations with friends/family as most important, 12% ranked artistic skills/aesthetic appreciation as most important, and 6% ranked romance as most important. The remaining 8 values were all ranked as most important to participants 2% of the time or less. Once the values were ranked, participants were asked to recall and provide the value that they

had ranked as most important, and to imagine and describe a personal experience in which their

most highly ranked value was important to them and made them feel good about themselves.

   Security Prime. Participants who were randomly assigned to the security prime condition

completed a written security prime as described by Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, and Nitzberg

(2005). Participants were asked to give the initials of someone they see as a supportive caregiver,

and to state how this person is related to them. A supportive caregiver was described as someone

who they can count on to be there for them in times of need, someone who makes them feel

secure, someone they can depend on, etc., for example, a parent, sibling, grandparent, or mentor.

Of the 54 participants in the security prime condition, approximately 17% gave the initials of a

parent (most often mother), 17% gave the initials of a spouse or significant other, 17% gave the

initials of a friend (at least 1/3 of which were the same as the close friend whose initials they had

previously given), 13% gave the initials of a child, and 13% gave the initials of a sibling. The

remaining 23% of initials given were of miscellaneous caregivers such as a mentor, aunt,

nephew, etc. After identifying their caregiver, participants were asked to imagine and describe a

situation in which (a) they confronted a problem that they could not solve on their own, and (b)

the person they had listed as a supportive caregiver assisted them and helped them to solve the

problem, and, as a result of their assistance, the problem was solved.

   Control. Participants who were randomly assigned to the control condition completed a

written control task that was created to match the experimental manipulations in format but was

neutral in content. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine and describe a time when

they were alone doing some sort of neutral household activity that is not a hobby of theirs (e.g.,

cleaning, organizing, etc.).

Threatening Scenario. Following the manipulation, all participants were asked to read and imagine a scenario involving a person in a difficult situation. To make the scenario more realistic and personally relevant, participants were asked to imagine that their closest friend, whose initials they had previously given and whom they had previously described, was the person in the scenario. The scenario reads as follows:

"Imagine you are going to meet up with the <u>close friend that you previously described</u>. As they get closer to you, you realize that their eyes are red and puffy. Once you are within earshot, they cry out, "I'M SO STRESSED OUT!" They go on to explain that their pet died over the weekend, their boss has been giving them trouble at work, and they are unsure of how to handle issues they're having with their family. "

After the scenario was presented to them, participants were asked to imagine themselves in the above scenario, and to imagine and write about how they would likely respond if they had actually experienced the situation in person. The scenario was purposefully written to make participants feel as though they should respond by giving some sort of emotional support, which, if our hypothesis was correct, should have evoked feelings of threat in male participants who did not complete one of the experimental manipulations (i.e., self-affirmation or security priming).

Mediators. To test the idea that the scenario would be threatening to males' feelings of masculinity, self-integrity, security, and self-esteem in the absence of the self-affirmation or security prime manipulations, participants then completed questionnaires that assessed their state feelings of self-integrity, self-esteem, masculinity, and state attachment security.

Self-integrity. Participants completed a modified, state version of Sherman, Cohen, Nelson, Nussbaum, and Bunyan's (2009) dispositional self-integrity measure. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with a series of 7 statements relating to their feelings of

self-integrity right now (e.g., Right now, I am comfortable with who I am) by rating their level of agreement on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). Responses were summed to form a composite measure of state Self-integrity, with larger sums indicating higher self-integrity (α = .944).

Self-esteem. Participants completed a modified version of McFarland and Ross's (1982) state self-esteem measure. They were asked to describe themselves on 14 pairs of opposing attributes by choosing a number between 1 and 7 that corresponds to how they feel about themselves right now. For example, the first 7-point scale was anchored with the adjectives good–bad. Other scale anchors included competent– incompetent, worthless–valuable, adequate– inadequate, and capable–incapable. Responses were summed to form a composite measure of Self-esteem, with larger sums indicating higher self-esteem. (α = .959)

Masculinity. Participants completed a self-report measure of state feelings of masculinity, which was created specifically for the purposes of this study. Participants indicated the extent to which they felt masculine right now by rating their agreement with a series of 5 statements relating to feelings of masculinity (e.g., At this time, I feel masculine) on a scale of 1 (not at all true) to 9 (extremely true). Responses were summed to form a composite measure of Masculinity, with larger sums indicating more feelings of masculinity (α = .891)

Manipulation Boost. To prevent potential effects of the manipulation from wearing off during the process of completing the assessments of mediators, a manipulation boost was added directly before the measurement of the second assessment of emotional support provision. The manipulation boost followed the exact same procedures as the original manipulations, but in this case participants were asked to imagine and write about a second, different experience that pertained to their manipulation.

Self-report and Open-Ended Assessment of Emotional Support. Finally, social support behaviors, both self-report and behavioral, were assessed using a self-report emotional support questionnaire and an open-ended note support measure, respectively.

Self-report emotional support. Participants completed a self-report measure of emotional support behaviors that they would provide in response to a given scenario involving their closest friend, including typical emotional support behaviors specified by Shakespeare-Finch and Obst (2011). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they would respond with specific behaviors to the scenario on a scale of 1 (not at all true) to 9 (extremely true). The measure included 19 possible emotional support responses, for example, "I would give my friend a hug." Responses were summed to form a composite measure of self-report Emotional Support, with larger sums indicating more emotional support behaviors *(α = .919)*.

Open-ended note support. After participants had completed all of the study's questionnaires, they were told that they had completed the study, but that there was one final, very short, and optional activity that the study author's would appreciate them completing. Participants were told that one of the members of the lab that created the study had recently gone through a difficult situation that, as an earlier part of the study, they had been asked to imagine their close friend going through. If participants chose to complete the activity, they were asked to leave a short note that could be shared with the affected lab member. Following data collection, notes were coded on a scale of 0 (not at all emotionally supportive) to 3 (high quality emotional support) by trained individuals blind to the participants' conditions. Open-ended Note Support scores were used as a behavioral measure of emotional support provision, with higher scores indicating more emotionally supportive behaviors.

Results

Assessment of Randomization

To ensure randomization of dispositional security across conditions, scores on the 24-item ECR scale were submitted to a one-way ANOVA using LSD posthoc tests with condition (self-affirmation, security prime, control) as the independent variable and dispositional security responses as the dependent variable. Results of this analysis revealed no main effect of condition, $F(2) = .08$, $p = .921$. This indicates that randomization was successful, and participants in all conditions had equivalent dispositional security.

Emotional Support Provision

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations for major study variables are presented in Table 1. To test the hypotheses that (1) females in the control condition would provide more emotional support than males in the control condition, and (2) males in either experimental condition would provide more emotional support than males in the control condition, a 2x3 ANOVA was conducted with gender (male, female) and condition (self-affirmation, security prime, control) as independent variables and self-reported emotional support as the dependent variable. Results of this analysis revealed a main effect of condition on emotional support, $F(2, 164) = 3.32$, $p = .038$. To further understand this main effect, a one-way ANOVA using LSD posthoc tests (with condition as the independent variable and self-report emotional support responses as the dependent variable) revealed that participants in the security prime condition reported providing significantly more emotional support ($M = 133.44$) than participants in both the self-affirmation condition ($M = 121.40$) and the control condition ($M = 122.58$), $F(2, 164) = 3.524$, $p = .032$. No main effect of gender was found on self-report emotional support, $F(2, 164) = .85$, $p = .359$.

Consistent with hypotheses, results also revealed a marginally significant condition x gender interaction predicting reported emotional support, $F(2, 164) = 2.62$, $p = .076$. Follow-up analysis of this interaction showed that the only condition in which males ($M = 114.85$) and females ($M = 131.38$) significantly differed on self-reported emotional support was the control condition, $F(2, 164) = 5.51$, $p = .022$. However, males ($M = 134.91$) and females ($M = 132.44$) in the security prime condition did not differ significantly in self-reported emotional support, and neither did males ($M = 123.17$) and females ($M = 120.14$) in the self-affirmation condition, all Fs(2, 164) < .18, all ps > .674. This interaction is depicted in Figure 1.

Next, another 2x3 ANOVA was conducted to predict emotionally supportive behavior coded from the written notes, with gender (male, female) and condition (self-affirmation, security prime, control) as independent variables. Contrary to hypotheses, there was only a marginal main effect of gender, such that, regardless of condition, females ($M = .473$) provided more emotional support in their notes than males ($M = .241$), $F(2, 164) = 3.19$, $p = .076$. There was neither a significant main effect of condition on note support nor a significant condition x gender interaction, all Fs(2, 164) < .60, all ps > .551. However, it is noteworthy that the emotional support provided in the notes for each condition followed the same pattern as the self-report responses, such that participants in the security prime condition ($M = .46$) provided more emotional support in their notes than participants in both the control condition ($M = .33$) and the self-affirmation condition ($M = .28$).

Mediating Factors

To test our hypothesis regarding mediators—that males in either experimental condition will have higher feelings of masculinity, self-esteem, and self-integrity than males in the control condition—responses to state measures of masculinity, self-esteem, and self-integrity were

submitted to a 2x3 ANOVA with gender (male, female) and condition (self-affirmation, security prime, control) as independent variables. Contrary to our hypothesis, the analysis revealed no significant main effects of condition or gender, as well as no significant condition x gender interactions for any of the mediators, all Fs(2, 164) < 1.74, all ps > .180.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to further explore the gender gap often found in emotional support provision, why it occurs, and how to decrease it. The results of this study provided evidence to support our hypothesis that, without participating in one of the experimental manipulations, females would provide more emotional support than males. Specifically, the significant condition x gender interaction that was revealed in our analysis of self-report emotional support indicated that females in the control condition reported that they would provide significantly more emotional support than males in the control condition. This not only supports our hypothesis, but also corroborates previous psychological research showing that females report providing more emotional support than males.

The results of our self-report emotional support analysis, however, were not as clear regarding our hypothesis that males who had completed either the self-affirmation or the security prime manipulation would be just as willing to provide emotional support as females, and more willing to provide emotional support than males who did not. Our results indicated that the hypothesized increase in emotional support provision only occurred for males who had completed the security prime. Males who completed the security prime were not only significantly more likely to provide emotional support than males in both the self-affirmation condition and the control condition, but they were also just as likely as females in the security prime condition to provide emotional support. These results indicate that the security prime did,

in fact, make males just as likely as females to provide emotional support, thereby closing the gender gap.

Unfortunately, these results also showed that the self-affirmation manipulation did not make males any more likely to provide emotional support than their control condition counterparts, which is contrary to our hypothesis. Both self-report and behavioral measures of emotional support provision revealed that males in the self-affirmation condition were equally likely to provide emotional support as males in the control condition. This indicates that, though our hypothesis was supported with regard to the security prime, the self-affirmation manipulation did not produce the desired effects, i.e. it did not make males more likely to provide emotional support. Interestingly, however, the significant condition x gender interaction that was revealed in our analysis of self-report emotional support also indicated that the self-affirmation did close the gender gap in emotional support provision, but not in the manner we had expected. The gender gap was closed, in this case, because women in the self-affirmation condition decreased their emotional support provision to match that of men. As such, the self-affirmation did not make males more likely to provide emotional support as we had hypothesized, but it actually made females less likely to provide emotional support.

The null and negative effects of the self-affirmation manipulation on emotional support provision in males and females, respectively, were unexpected, considering all of the evidence in the literature regarding its positive and lasting impacts. Though it could be due to the fact that a self-affirmation intervention may not be the appropriate tool to increase emotional support provision, there is also some evidence that it may be due to a flaw in the study's design. As stated, participants in the self-affirmation condition were asked to rank a set of common important values from most to least important, and they were then asked to recall which value

they had ranked as most important both in the original manipulation and in the manipulation

boost. After looking at participants' responses where they were supposed to recall this value, we

noticed that many participants were not able to remember what they had ranked first (especially

during the manipulation boost). Without being able to remember their most important value,

many participants were not able to complete the rest of the self-affirmation (or boost), likely

contributing to its surprising effects. Future studies using self-affirmation manipulations should

learn from this mistake, and be sure to make it clear to participants what they chose as their most

important value. However, security priming may simply be a more effective means of increasing

emotional support provision than self-affirmation, as it has previously been shown to increase

care, compassion, and willingness to help others, while self-affirmation has not.

The analysis of our behavioral measure of emotional support provision, note support,

revealed a marginal main effect whereby females, across all conditions, provided more emotional

support than males. This further supports our hypothesis that females in the control condition

would provide more emotional support than males, but it contradicts previous literature that has

found no gender differences in emotional support provision through behavioral measures. This

contradiction may be due to the fact that the behavioral measure in our study, having people

write a note for an imaginary scenario and later coding it for emotional support, is different from

behavioral measures used in many previous studies, which usually involve videotaping and

coding people's interactions. Videotaping people's interactions may allow for a more accurate

assessment of their support provision behaviors, as people may not respond in an anonymous

note in the same manner that they would in person. Despite this, our results do support our

hypothesis and much of the previous literature on the gender differences in emotional support

provision, suggesting that females generally provide more emotional support than males.

Finally, our results did not provide evidence to support our hypothesis regarding the possible mediators in the relationship between gender and emotional support provision. If our theory that providing emotional support is mediated by a threat to males' masculinity, self-esteem, and/or self-integrity were correct, and the self-affirmation and security prime were successful at combating these threats, then male participants in the control condition's feelings of masculinity, self-esteem, and/or self-integrity should have been lower than males in the self-affirmation and security prime conditions. However, there were no condition differences in feelings of masculinity, self-esteem, or self-integrity, indicating that neither the self-affirmation nor the security prime were able to increase or buffer these feelings. This, in conjunction with the fact that the security prime did increase emotional support provision in males without increasing any of these feelings, indicates that these may not be mediators as we had hypothesized. However, other research that has been done on the gender difference has found that masculinity and femininity do play a role in emotional support provision, indicating that masculinity may still be a mediator (Verhofstadt & Weytens, 2013). As our measure of feelings of masculinity was very face-valid, participants may have responded based on demand characteristics, so using a more discrete and delicate assessment may allow for replication of previous findings.

Despite finding some promising results, this study did have limitations. As mentioned, the study was conducted online, so we were unable to observe actual emotional support behaviors—we simply had to rely on self-report and written behaviors. Additionally, participants were behaving in response to a very specific scenario that was written to provoke emotional support provision, so participants' behaviors in response to this situation may not be indicative of how they might act in the more ambiguous situations that we encounter in everyday life. Further, participants were only asked to imagine the scenario, they did not actually experience it, so it

may have been difficult for some participants to accurately imagine and report what they would

do. Finally, participants in the self-affirmation condition may not have received its full benefits,

due to the aforementioned flaw in the study's design.

Future research on the gender difference in emotional support provision should not only

keep these limitations in mind, but should also continue to focus on why the difference occurs

and how to reduce it. Though security priming was effective, there may be other tools that can be

more readily applied in everyday life to increase emotional support provision in males.

Additionally, future research should include not only self-report measures of emotional support

provision, but also observations of actual support interactions. The inclusion of support

interactions would not only make the situation more realistic for participants, but it would also

help to better determine if there truly is a difference between self-report and behavioral

assessments of emotional support provision.

In conclusion, this investigation showed that without intervention, females do provide

more emotional support than males, but that this typical gender difference in emotional support

provision can be reduced. Further, though we still do not know the specific mechanisms at play,

the present study has found promising evidence that attachment security priming may be one

possible way to increase emotional support provision in males. Therefore, if we can find ways to

increase feelings of attachment security in males in everyday life, we may be able to close the

gender gap in emotional support provision once and for all, making everyone's relationships and

the social support that they receive within them more beneficial.

References

Adams, G. A., King, L. A., & King, D. W. (1996). Relationships of job and family involvement, family social support, and work-family conflict with job and life satisfaction. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 81,* 411-420.

Barbee, A. P., Gulley, M. R., & Cunningham, M. R. (1990). Support Seeking in Personal Relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,7*, 531-540.

Brady, S. T., Reeves, S. L., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Cook, J. E., Taborsky-Barba, S., . . . Cohen, G. L. (2016). The psychology of the affirmed learner: Spontaneous self-affirmation in the face of stress. *Journal of Educational Psychology,108*, 353-373.

Brennan, K., Clark, C., & Shaver, P. (1998). Self-report measurement of adult attachment: An integrative overview. In *Attachment Theory and Close Relationships* (pp. 25-45). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). The Psychology of Change: Self-Affirmation and Social Psychological Intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology, 65*, 333-371.

Dunkel-Schetter, C. (1984). Social Support and Cancer: Findings Based on Patient Interviews and Their Implications. *Journal of Social Issues, 40*, 77-98.

Jakubiak, B. K., & Feeney, B. C. (2016). A Sense of Security. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 7*, 745-753.

Lannin, D. G., Guyll, M., Vogel, D. L., & Madon, S. (2013). Reducing the stigma associated with seeking psychotherapy through self-affirmation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 60*, 508-519.

Luke, M. A., Sedikides, C., & Carnelley, K. (2012). Your love lifts me higher! The energizing quality of secure relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *38*, 721–733.

Macgeorge, E. L., Gillihan, S. J., Samter, W., & Clark, R. A. (2003). Skill Deficit or Differential Motivation? *Communication Research, 30*, 272-303.

Macgeorge, E. L., Graves, A. R., Feng, B., Gillihan, S. J., & Burleson, B. R. (2004). The Myth of Gender Cultures: Similarities Outweigh Differences in Men's and Women's Provision of and Responses to Supportive Communication. *Sex Roles, 50*, 143-175.

Malecki, C. K., & Demaray, M. K. (2003). What Type of Support Do They Need? Investigating Student Adjustment as Related to Emotional, Informational, Appraisal, and Instrumental Support. *School Psychology Quarterly, 18*, 231-252.

Matthewson, M., Smith, R. B., & Montgomery, I. (2011). Gender Differences in Children's and Parents' Social Support Perceptions. *Journal of Relationships Research, 2*, 10-16.

McFarland, C., & Ross, M. (1982). Impact of causal attributions on affective reactions to success and failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 43*, 937–946.

Mcqueen, A., & Klein, W. M. (2006). Experimental manipulations of self-affirmation: A systematic review. *Self and Identity, 5*, 289-354.

Mickelson, K. D., Helgeson, V. S., & Weiner, E. (1995). Gender effects on social support provision and receipt. *Personal Relationships, 2*, 211-224.

Mikulincer, M., Gillath, O., Sapir-Lavid, Y., Yaakobi, E., Arias, K., Tal-Aloni, L., & Bor, G. (2003). Attachment Theory and Concern for Others'Welfare: Evidence That Activation of the Sense of Secure Base Promotes Endorsement of Self-Transcendence Values. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 25*, 299-312.

Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2007). Boosting Attachment Security to Promote Mental Health, Prosocial Values, and Inter-Group Tolerance. *Psychological Inquiry, 18*, 139-156.

Pasch, L. A., Bradbury, T. N., & Davila, J. (1997). Gender, negative affectivity, and observed social support behavior in marital interaction. *Personal Relationships, 4*, 361-378.

Samter, W. (2009). How gender and cognitive complexity influence the provision of emotional support: A study of indirect effects. *Communication Reports, 15*, 5-16.

Scholz, U., Klaghofer, R., Dux, R., Roellin, M., Boehler, A., Muellhaupt, B., . . . Goetzmann, L. (2011). Predicting intentions and adherence behavior in the context of organ transplantation: Gender differences of provided social support. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 72*, 214-219.

Seeman, T. (2008, April). Support & Social Conflict: Section One - Social Support. Retrieved from http://www.macses.ucsf.edu/research/psychosocial/socsupp.php

Shakespeare-Finch, J., & Obst, P. L. (2011). The Development of the 2-Way Social Support Scale: A Measure of Giving and Receiving Emotional and Instrumental Support. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 93*, 483-490.

Sherman, D. K., Cohen, G. L., Nelson, L. D., Nussbaum, A. D., Bunyan, D. P., & Garcia, J. (2009). Affirmed yet unaware: Exploring the role of awareness in the process of self affirmation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 97*, 745-764.

Sherman, D., & Hartson, K. (2011). Reconciling Self-Protection with Self-Improvement: Self-Affirmation Theory . In *Handbook of Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection* (pp. 131-151). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Verhofstadt, L. L., Buysse, A., & Ickes, W. (2007). Social Support in Couples: An Examination of Gender Differences Using Self-report and Observational Methods. *Sex Roles, 57*, 267-282.

Verhofstadt, L. L., & Weytens, F. (2013). Biological sex and gender role identity as predictors of

     spousal support provision: a scenario-based study. *Journal of Gender Studies, 22*, 166-

     177.

Wong, Y. J., Levant, R. F., Welsh, M. M., Zaitsoff, A., Garvin, M., King, D., & Aguilar, M.

     (2015). Masculinity Priming. *The Journal of Men's Studies, 23*, 98-106.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among self-report emotional support provision and proposed mediators of masculinity, self-esteem, and self-integrity.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1 Emotional Support	125.76	26.40	1	-.122	.232**	-.286**
2 Masculinity	30.13	4.94	-.122	1	.205*	-.251**
3 Self-esteem	73.89	18.42	.232**	.205*	1	-.655**
4 Self-integrity	18.23	9.12	-.286**	-.251**	-.655**	1

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01

Figure 1. Self-report emotional support provision by condition and gender.
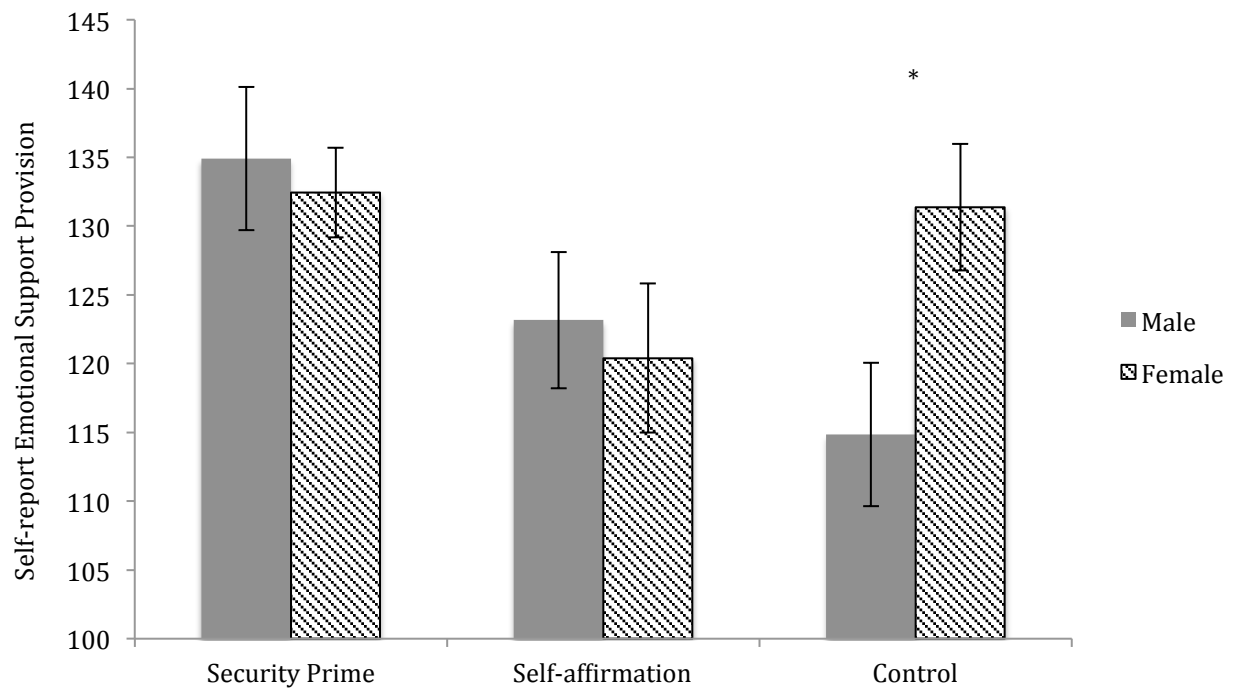
Note. Higher scores represent more emotional support provision. Error bars represent standard

error of the mean. *p < .05