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Social Support in Intimate Relationships: The Role of Relationship Autonomy

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Abstract

Prior research on effective support interactions in intimate relationships often focuses on support provision rather than how people seek support. The current study investigated how differences in relationship autonomy—authentic and self-determined relationship motivations—predicted the behavior and outcomes of couples (*N* = 80) in support interactions. Results indicated that support seekers' motivation and behavior were the primary contributor to effective support interactions. Support seekers who were autonomously motivated tended to seek support in a more direct and positive manner, which in turn promoted greater levels of emotional, informational, and tangible support from their partners. The relationship autonomy of both the support provider and the support seeker also predicted better subjective experiences regardless of behavior, such as perceiving the interaction as more supportive. These results illustrate how relationship autonomy promotes well-being in relationships via support seeking behaviors, as well as positive interpretations and experiences of important relationship interactions.

Keywords

social support, self-determination theory, relationships, motivation

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Imagine that you are struggling to achieve something important to you, such as being more punctual or eating fewer sugary foods, so you seek support from your romantic partner. You might openly, clearly, and honestly describe your problem to your partner. In response, your partner might ask helpful questions to clarify the situation, provide practical solutions to the problem, or express care and reassurance. Alternatively, you might demand that your partner help you or blame them for being part of the problem. Demand and blame, in turn, may elicit criticism or withdrawal from your partner. These examples illustrate that individuals can seek and provide support from partners in several ways, behaviors which have important consequences for individual and relationship well-being (e.g., Cohen, 2004; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2015). Support seeking that is open, direct, and positive is likely to enhance the positivity of the support that is provided, as well as promote individual and couple well-being (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Don, Mickelson, & Barbee, 2013). Support provision that is caring, helps to clarify the situation, or is practically helpful also boosts psychological and relationship well-being (Cohen, 2004; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2015).

Although the support literature distinguishes effective from ineffective support provision and seeking behaviors, research also shows that not everyone approaches, interprets, or experiences support interactions in the same way (e.g., Cavallo, Zee, & Higgins, 2016; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Orina, 2007). In the current study, we draw upon self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2014; Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013) to address two important questions from the social support literature: (a) Why do some people behave in a more effective manner during social support interactions, and (b) even accounting for their behavior, why do some people experience more positive outcomes from social support interactions? People high in relationship autonomy—those who feel authentically invested in their relationships—are likely to approach partners openly and honestly when seeking support and experience support interactions as an opportunity for closeness and growth (Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990; Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanayakkara, & Neighbors, 2002). In contrast, people with low relationship autonomy, such as those who feel pressured or obligated to be in their relationships, are likely to approach support more negatively, as well as experience support

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interactions as stressful and burdensome. Drawing upon an observational sample of 80 intimate couples, we examine how relationship autonomy predicts behavior during, and outcomes of, support interactions.

An Overview of Support in Intimate Relationships

People rely on effective social support for the achievement of personal goals (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2015; Girme, Overall, & Simpson, 2013) and to maintain their mental and physical health (see Cohen, 2004, for a review). Yet, not all ways that people provide social support are effective. Support that is caring, helps to clarify the situation, and acknowledges the recipient's needs tends to have beneficial outcomes for the well-being of recipients and for the relationship, including stress reduction, increased perceived partner responsiveness, and better mood (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Gerin, Pieper, Levy, & Pickering, 1992; Girme et al., 2013; Howland & Simpson, 2010; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010). In contrast, support that is overly intrusive, negative, or absent can create more stress for the individual in need and damage relationship satisfaction (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Don et al., 2013; Overall et al., 2010).

Social support provision has been conceptualized in many different ways (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). We focused on four types of support provision that have been shown to be effective in prior research: *tangible, informational, emotional*, and (inversely) *negative* support (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Overall et al., 2010; Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997). Tangible support encompasses practical offers of assistance or attempts to help solve the problem (e.g., offering someone a ride or money to fix their car). Informational support encompasses help in understanding the problem, or advice in how to go about solving the problem. Emotional support encompasses expressions of care, reassurance, or love. These are distinct facets of support provision shown to reduce distress, improve goal striving, and enhance satisfaction with the relationship (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Overall et al., 2010; Pasch et al., 1997). By contrast, negative support encompasses criticism, blame, and behaviors that undermine the individual in need of support. Prior research demonstrates that negative support degrades relationship satisfaction, exacerbates the support seeker's distress, and impedes the recipient's competence and goal striving (e.g., Don et al., 2013; Hammond & Overall, 2015; Overall et al., 2010).

The behavior of the support *seeker* also plays a crucial role in support interactions (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Don et al., 2013). Despite the fact that support seeking has received far less attention than support provision, receipt, or perceptions (Feeney & Collins, 2015), some perspectives argue that the manner of seeking sets the stage for the success or failure of the entire support interaction (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Barbee, Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998; Cutrona, 1996). Those who seek support by openly discussing their problem, directly asking for advice or assistance, and/or clarifying the situation facilitate the provider's capacity to deliver the desired support. Indeed, support seekers who engage with their partners in direct, open, and self-disclosing ways tend to feel more supported, report greater relationship satisfaction, and experience greater psychological well-being (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Don et al., 2013; Ognibene & Collins, 1998). In accordance with prior research, we term direct, open, and self-disclosing behaviors *positive support seeking*. On the contrary, support seekers who blame their partner, display irritation and anger, and reject offers of help are likely to make it difficult for the provider to effectively offer support. In accordance with prior research, we call these blaming and rejecting behaviors *negative support seeking*, and extant research (although limited) demonstrates these behaviors also predict negative outcomes for the self and the relationship (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Don et al., 2013).

Although behavior clearly plays a role in whether support interactions are successful, research also demonstrates that not all people approach, experience, or interpret these interactions in the same way (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Simpson et al., 2007). Indeed, even when controlling for observed behavior, individual differences emerge on important outcomes of support interactions (Collins & Feeney, 2000). For instance, observational research examining relationship conflicts demonstrates that, because of their discomfort with emotional intimacy, individuals high in avoidant attachment tend to experience stress when their partners overtly express care and emotional comfort, even though this type of caregiving tends to have a positive influence for most people (see Simpson & Overall, 2014, for an overview). Thus, in addition to elucidating determinants of people's behavior during support interactions, it is also important to understand why different people experience similar interactions in different ways.

Individual Differences in Social Support Interactions: The Role of Relationship Autonomy

Why do some people seek, provide, and respond to support in positive and effective ways, while others do not? SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) argues people have an innate motivation toward growth, exploration, and integration, but that this motivation can be thwarted by situations that are not supportive of fundamental psychological needs. People's behaviors and choices that are self-determined, or *autonomously motivated*, are most beneficial for their psychological well-being (e.g., mood, stress, and creativity), personal growth, and performance when pursuing personal goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000;

Ryan & Deci, 2002). Autonomous motivation is characterized by an authentic, personally endorsed investment in one's activities. By contrast, *controlled motivation* refers to induced or externally driven motivation that is not authentically endorsed by the individual. Research across a variety of domains, including work, education, and medicine, illustrates that people who are more autonomously motivated exert more effort, demonstrate greater persistence, achieve their goals more readily, and experience greater enjoyment, vitality, creativity, and happiness throughout the process of goal pursuit (Baard, 2002; Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Reeve, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). As we discuss next, autonomous motivation is also relevant to people's engagement in romantic relationships.

Relationship autonomy refers to an authentic, self-endorsed investment in a particular relationship and importantly is not "autonomy" in the sense of independence from one's partner (Deci & Ryan, 2014; Knee et al., 2013). Specifically, people initiate and remain committed to relationships for many different reasons, and some of these reasons are more self-determined than others (Knee et al., 2013). An individual involved in a relationship because they share important goals with their partner, because they feel they grow as a result of being in the relationship, or because they sincerely enjoy spending time with their partner would be considered highly autonomously motivated. By contrast, an individual involved in a relationship because they are afraid of being alone or because they are pressured by friends and family to be with the individual would be driven by external or controlling forces, and therefore low in relationship autonomy. A number of studies demonstrate that people with greater relationship autonomy tend to experience benefits across a wide variety of outcomes, including relationship satisfaction and personal happiness (see Deci & Ryan, 2014; Knee et al., 2013, for reviews).

How is relationship autonomy relevant to support specifically? We believe that relationship autonomy is likely to enhance support interactions by (a) promoting more effective support seeking and provision behaviors and (b) enhancing the enjoyment and reducing the stress of engaging in these interactions more generally. Just as autonomous motivation promotes better performance and greater well-being in other domains, an authentic, self-endorsed investment in one's relationship likely means that individuals who are more autonomously motivated are especially likely to seek and provide support in a healthy manner. SDT suggests that individuals in the relationship due to a genuine feeling of connection, care, and concern for their partner will be more caring, open, direct, and understanding throughout the process of support seeking and provision (Deci & Ryan, 2014; Knee et al., 2013). Indeed, Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, and Patrick (2005) examined the role of autonomous motivation in couple's responses to relationship conflict; greater actor and partner relationship autonomy predicted less defensive behavior, more understanding, and better relationship satisfaction. People with greater relationship autonomy also tend to be more open, self-disclosing, and nondefensive (Gaine & La Guardia, 2009), behaviors which tend to be effective in eliciting positive support from providers (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Barbee et al., 1998). Similarly, the increased perspective taking, understanding, and nondefensiveness of relationship autonomy should all enhance support provider's ability to give emotional, tangible, and information support, as well as reduce the likelihood they will respond with negative support (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Pasch et al., 1997).

In addition to enhancing behavior, we also suspect that autonomous motivation will enhance how people subjectively experience social support interactions. Individuals high in relationship autonomy are more likely to view relationship problems, concerns, and stressors as opportunities to grow (Blais et al., 1990; Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Knee et al., 2005; Knee et al., 2002). With respect to support providers, individuals low in relationship autonomy are likely to find it burdensome to provide support to their partner, whereas individuals high in autonomy would likely approach support as an opportunity to enhance intimacy, to express their love for their partner, and improve communication and closeness within the relationship, all of which would likely improve their subjective experience of these interactions (Blais et al., 1990; Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Knee et al., 2013; Knee et al., 2002). Support seekers who are high in relationship autonomy should similarly view the opportunity to disclose and discuss their goal with their partner as an opportunity to grow, both individually and as a couple, rather than as an obligation or something to be feared (Blais et al., 1990). Thus, we predicted that support seekers and providers who were high in relationship autonomy would experience support interactions more positively in the form of greater perceived support, lower stress, and better mood after the interaction.

We assessed perceived support, stress, and mood because each is (a) an important outcome of support underlying long-term physical and psychological well-being (Feeney & Collins, 2015), and (b) particularly applicable to the growth-oriented, authentic investment in the relationship that is characterized by relationship autonomy. Importantly, we hypothesized that relationship autonomy enhances *subjective* experiences of support interactions, and therefore that relationship autonomy would predict these outcomes even when accounting for behaviors during the interaction. In support of this expectation, Knee et al. (2005) demonstrated that individuals with greater relationship autonomy reported greater relationship satisfaction after relationship conflicts even when they controlled for objective features of these conflicts, such as the length of the conflict or whether it was resolved. In other words, we expected that people higher in relationship autonomy would experience positive outcomes from support interactions simply because these interactions

with their partner represent an activity in which they were personally invested.

One prior study has specifically examined relationship autonomy in romantic support contexts. Hadden, Rodriguez, Knee, and Porter (2015) demonstrated that partners who reported greater relationship autonomy provided greater levels of (a) secure base support (i.e., supporting growth through being available when needed and allowing for independence; see Feeney & Thrush, 2010) and (b) support for the basic needs of their partner. The current research extends Hadden et al. in three ways. First, we specifically investigated behaviors of the support seeker, which should play a crucial role in the support interaction, but have often been overlooked by prior research (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Second, we utilized an observational paradigm in which objective coders rated support seeking and provision behaviors. Self-report methods reveal important information about support interactions, but they do not always correspond with actual behavior, and can be colored by a number of biases (see Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Lakey & Cohen, 2000, for reviews). Third, although Hadden and colleagues' study included dyadic data, they only examined actor and partner effects in relation to perceptions of support provision, overlooking the dyadic nature of the support interaction. In the case of social support, it is possible that having a partner who is high in relationship autonomy means the individual is more comfortable being open, honest, and caring during the interaction. As such, we examined the influence of individual and partner relationship autonomy on behavior during, and outcomes after, the support interaction.

The Current Study

We investigated whether people's relationship autonomy predicted (a) their behaviors in support interactions, and (b) their subjective experience of these interactions, as assessed by their perceptions of support, their feelings of stress, and their mood immediately after the interaction. First, we expected that people with greater relationship autonomy would be more open, direct, disclosing, and less negative when seeking support. Thus, we predicted that the support seeker's relationship autonomy would be associated with greater positive and lower negative support seeking (Hypothesis 1). Similarly, we expected that people with greater relationship autonomy would be especially driven to care for their partner in times of need. Thus, we predicted that the support provider's relationship autonomy would predict greater levels of emotional, informational, and tangible support, as well as less negative support (Hypothesis 2).

Testing Hypotheses 1 and 2 also allowed us to investigate a question more broadly relevant to the social support literature: whether the support seeker's motivation and behavior play a role in determining the success of the overall interaction. Numerous theorists have described the importance of the support seeker, but few studies have tested this assumption. Accordingly, we tested whether the support seeker's relationship autonomy predicted types of support enacted by *providers* via the seeker's behaviors (Hypothesis 1a). This question addresses a wider issue of whether characteristics of support *seekers* set the stage for the effectiveness of support interactions because of the ways they approach their partners and the interaction (see Collins & Feeney, 2000; Don et al., 2013).

Next, we examined whether relationship autonomy on behalf of support seekers and providers would predict their perceptions of support in the interaction, their feelings of stress during the interaction, and their mood after the interaction. We predicted that relationship autonomy would predict better subjective experiences of the interaction in the form of greater perceived support, lower perceived stress, a decrease in negative affect, and an increase in positive affect (Hypothesis 3).

It is important to note, prior research has primarily focused on individual differences in attachment style as determinants of support seeking and provision, as well as subjective experiences during these interactions (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Girme, Overall, Simpson, & Fletcher, 2015; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009; Ognibene & Collins, 1998; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992; Simpson, Rholes, Orina, & Grich, 2002). Many studies suggest that a secure attachment style (as opposed to avoidant or anxious attachment styles) is associated with provision of effective forms of social support, such as greater emotional and less negative support (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2001, 2015; Ognibene & Collins, 1998). Moreover, although the literature is limited regarding support seeking, secure forms of attachment generally predict more open and direct forms of support seeking (e.g., Simpson et al., 1992; Simpson et al., 2002). Similarly, individuals with lower levels of attachment insecurity also tend to subjectively experience support interactions more positively (Collins & Feeney, 2000). In light of this research, we extended prior work by testing each of these three hypotheses while controlling for attachment style.

Method

Participants

Eighty romantic couples (79 men, 81 women) were recruited through one partner responding to participant pool advertisements at a large university in the Midwest of the United States (M_{age} = 20.12, SD = 3.85, range = 18-46). Participation required being in a committed, monogamous relationship for at least 3 months (M_{length} = 1.57 years, SD = 1.82), and any member of the couple who was enrolled in a psychology course received credit for their participation. Four additional couples participated but did not complete the study for various reasons (e.g., they did not complete any of the required questionnaires; technical problems in the lab), meaning their

data were not available. The majority of the sample identified as Caucasian (81.9%), 10.6% as African American, 1.9% as Latino or Hispanic, 3.1% as Asian, and 2.5% of the sample as another race/ethnicity.

Procedure

Participants individually completed a questionnaire including a quality they would like to improve about themselves that was *not* something about their relationship (Howland & Simpson, 2010). Couples were then reunited for a social support interaction task in which one member of the dyad was randomly assigned to the *support seeker* role and asked to share their self-improvement goal with their partner, the *support provider* (see Howland & Simpson, 2010). Couples were video recorded as they discussed this goal for 7 minutes. After this discussion, participants separated to complete a postinteraction questionnaire and were then debriefed.

Initial Questionnaire

Relationship autonomy. The Couples Motivation Index (Blais et al., 1990) assessed participants' autonomous motivation toward their relationships. Participants are instructed to think about why they are in the relationship and then rate 18 items considering how each corresponds to their own reasons to be in a relationship (e.g., "Because I value the way my relationship with my partner allows me to improve as a person"; "Because I would feel guilty if I separated from my partner"; 1 = *does not correspond at all* to 7 = *corresponds exactly*). Following prior research, individuals' relationship autonomy is computed by an algorithm that weights each of six subscales which assess a continuum of self-determined motivations, ranging from the least self-determined (amotivated) to the most self-determined (intrinsic; see Blais et al., 1990, for detail on the development of these weights, and Blais et al., 1990; Hadden et al., 2015; Knee et al., 2005, for reliability and validity). This measure demonstrated good reliability for both the support seeker and the support provider (provider, $\alpha = .74$; seeker, $\alpha = .77$).

Attachment style. The Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins, 1996) assessed individuals' attachment. Twelve items assessed *attachment avoidance* (e.g., "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others") and six items assessed *attachment anxiety* ("I often worry that romantic partners don't really love me"; 1 = *not at all characteristic of me* to 5 = *very characteristic of me*). Reliabilities for these scales were good (provider anxiety, $\alpha = .79$; seeker anxiety, $\alpha = .80$; provider avoidance, $\alpha = .89$; seeker avoidance, $\alpha = .82$).

Positive and negative affect. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to assess positive and negative mood both before and after the support interaction. The scale consists of 10 positive and 10 negative adjectives (e.g., "interested," "ashamed"). Participants rated the extent to which they felt each at the present moment on a scale from 1 = *very slightly or not at all* to 5 = *extremely* (seeker positive, $\alpha = .86$; provider positive, $\alpha = .92$; seeker negative, $\alpha = .87$; provider negative, $\alpha = .85$).

Postinteraction Questionnaire

Perceptions of the support interaction. Four items from Overall et al. (2010) were averaged to assess support recipients' perceptions of support, asking the extent to which they "felt supported by their partner," "felt helped by their partner," "appreciated their partner's input," and "valued their partner's input" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a great deal*; $\alpha = .95$). Support providers indicated how much they felt they had "supported their partner" and "helped their partner," which were averaged ($r = .73$).

Perceptions of stress. Participants were asked, "how upset you were during the discussion" (1 = *not at upset* to 7 = *extremely upset*) and "how stressful was the discussion" (1 = *not at all stressful* to 7 = *extremely stressful*), and the two items were averaged ($r = .63$).

Positive and negative affect. Positive and negative affect after the discussion were again assessed using the PANAS (seeker positive mood, $\alpha = .92$; provider positive mood, $\alpha = .91$; seeker negative mood, $\alpha = .88$; provider negative mood, $\alpha = .90$).

Observational Coding Procedure

Five objective coders rated behaviors of both the support seeker and the support provider following a coding schedule developed by Overall et al. (2010). This procedure integrates the most common and theoretically important types of support seeking and provision from prior schedules that include the Support Interaction Coding System (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998), the Support Behavior Code (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992), and the Interactive Coping Behavior Coding System (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995).

Coders made global ratings of the extent to which they observed the following support behaviors across the videotaped interactions. When rating support recipients, coders assessed positive and negative support seeking behaviors (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Overall et al., 2010; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Positive support seeking included directly asking for help, searching for a solution, providing a clear explanation, and/or expressing affection and appreciation for the support provider's help. Negative support seeking behaviors included obfuscating the problem, rejecting assistance, and/or criticizing the individual providing support. When rating support providers, coders assessed emotional support (e.g., showing love and affection), tangible support (e.g., offering practical assistance), informational support (e.g.,

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Major Study Variables.

	Support providers			Support recipients		
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Relationship autonomy	79	24.3	8.00	79	23.64	8.78
Attachment anxiety	79	2.61	0.87	79	2.44	1.02
Attachment avoidance	79	2.71	0.64	79	2.61	0.64
Perceived support	78	5.73	1.34	77	5.17	1.31
Interaction stress	78	1.69	1.17	79	1.42	0.91
Positive affect preinteraction	78	3.38	0.73	77	3.26	0.90
Positive affect postinteraction	78	3.31	0.94	79	3.29	0.93
Negative affect preinteraction	78	1.70	0.67	77	1.52	0.53
Negative affect postinteraction	78	1.54	0.62	79	1.34	0.54
Observed emotional support	77	3.86	1.02	—	—	—
Observed informational support	77	4.30	1.11	—	—	—
Observed tangible support	77	2.66	1.27	—	—	—
Observed negative support	77	1.81	0.81	—	—	—
Observed positive support seeking	—	—	—	77	3.81	0.96
Observed negative support seeking	—	—	—	77	2.02	1.25

offering advice or trying to uncover the source of the problem), and negative support (e.g., arguing with, criticizing, or blaming the individual in need of support). Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) indicated that the ratings made by the coders were adequately consistent (emotional, ICC = .75; negative support provision, ICC = .75; informational, ICC = .77; tangible, ICC = .84; negative support seeking, ICC = .85; and positive support seeking, ICC = .76).

Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all major study variables. Overall, participants reported generally high levels of autonomous motivation toward their relationships. On average, they perceived receiving and providing high levels of support during the interaction task.

Table 2 provides bivariate correlations for major study variables. As an indicator of predictive validity, we checked to ensure that the observed support behaviors were associated with perceptions of the support interaction task in the expected manner. As shown in Table 2, participants' perceptions of the support interaction tended to be moderately associated with observed support behaviors.

Hypotheses 1 and 2: Does relationship autonomy predict support seeking and provision?

We tested whether relationship autonomy would promote better support seeking and provision during support interactions by conducting a series of multiple linear regressions in which both seeker and provider relationship autonomy predicted observed support seeking behaviors (positive direct support seeking or negative direct support seeking) or support provision behaviors (emotional, tangible, informational, or negative support provision), controlling for gender and attachment insecurity.[1] For all subsequent analyses, approximate effect size *r* for each coefficient was computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula. Results for these analyses are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Greater seeker (but not provider) relationship autonomy predicted greater observed positive support seeking and lower negative support seeking. Results were similar for support provision behavior such that greater seeker (but not provider) relationship autonomy predicted greater observed informational and tangible support provision, and less negative support provision. Greater seeker autonomy also marginally predicted greater emotional support provision (p = .096). The size of the effect of seeker autonomy on seeker and provider behavior was medium across all statistically significant outcomes, ranging from $r = .26$ to $r = .34$. These results indicate that support seekers' autonomous motivation promotes more effective behavior for both seekers and providers during support interactions.

Hypothesis 1a: Does seeker relationship autonomy predict support provision through support seeking?

We next tested whether seeker relationship autonomy predicted provider behavior via more positive, and less negative, support seeking. We followed Preacher and Hayes's (2008) recommendations by conducting a series of four bootstrapped tests of multiple mediation analyses. In each of these tests, seeker relationship autonomy was the distal predictor, positive support seeking and negative support seeking were specified as the mediators, and one of emotional, informational, tangible, or negative support provision was specified as the outcome variable. All analyses controlled for the relationship autonomy of the support provider, the attachment avoidance and anxiety of both the seeker and the provider, and the gender of the support seeker. Results of the bootstrapped estimates of the indirect effects from these analyses are presented in Table 5.

Greater seeker relationship autonomy was indirectly associated with greater emotional, informational, and tangible (but not negative) support provision, through greater positive direct support seeking. Although seeker autonomy was negatively associated with negative support seeking, the indirect effects of seeker autonomy on provider behavior through negative support seeking were not significant. Thus, support seekers with an authentic, self-endorsed investment in their relationship tend to be more direct, open, and disclosing when seeking support, which then leads to more caring, advice, and practical offers of assistance from their partners.

Hypothesis 3: Does relationship autonomy predict better outcomes after support interactions?

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations for Major Study Variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Relationship autonomy	*.15*	**−.24**	**−.25**	**.40**	−.12	**.27**	**.27**	**−.44**	**−.46**	.08	.05	−.20	−.09	.06	−.01
2. Attachment anxiety	−.09	*−.09*	**.52**	−.21	.13	**.24**	**.24**	**.42**	**.32**	**−.24**	**−.23**	−.13	**.38**	−.14	.03
3. Attachment avoidance	**−.29**	**.39**	*.15*	**−.27**	**.32**	**−.28**	**−.25**	**.37**	**.27**	−.18	**−.23**	.09	**.23**	−.11	.16
4. Social support	**.64**	−.17	**−.35**	***.41***	**−.26**	**.37**	**.59**	−.10	**.29**	**.29**	**.26**	.21	−.21	**.28**	**−.29**
5. Stress	**−.22**	.15	**.30**	**−.43**	**.52**	.04	−.13	**.28**	**.60**	−.11	**−.25**	−.06	.19	−.21	**.28**
6. Positive affect preinteraction	**.16**	−.21	−.16	.12	−.01	**.25**	**.79**	.19	.08	.15	.19	.06	−.14	.21	−.15
7. Positive affect postinteraction	**.24**	**−.26**	−.19	**.40**	**−.26**	**.75**	***.32***	.08	−.12	.2	.21	.22	**−.23**	**.33**	−.17
8. Negative affect preinteraction	**−.41**	**.31**	**.50**	**−.33**	**.41**	.02	−.09	*.28*	**.66**	.02	.04	−.05	.09	−.11	.02
9. Negative affect postinteraction	**−.39**	**.28**	**.36**	**−.48**	**.70**	−.01	**−.27**	**.68**	***.40***	−.07	−.09	−.18	**.27**	**−.23**	.15
10. Observed ES	.21	−.09	−.10	.19	.01	−.12	−.05	−.01	−.08	—	**.44**	**.44**	**−.31**	**.35**	−.02
11. Observed IS	.30	**−.23**	**−.36**	**.44**	−.10	−.01	.20	−.16	−.20	**.44**	—	**.43**	**−.25**	**.43**	−.19
12. Observed TS	.26	**−.29**	−.21	**.26**	−.10	−.11	.07	−.15	**−.27**	**.44**	**.44**	—	−.12	**.35**	.07
13. Observed NS	−.22	**.23**	.11	**−.24**	.08	−.01	−.13	.04	.17	**−.31**	−.25	−.12	—	**−.25**	.38
14. Observed PSS	**.41**	−.21	**−.26**	**.38**	−.22	.15	**.23**	**−.37**	**−.35**	**.35**	**.43**	**.35**	**−.25**	—	−.51
15. Observed NSS	**−.30**	.12	**.26**	**.33**	**.38**	−.14	**−.27**	**.36**	**.33**	−.20	−.19	.07	**.38**	**−.51**	—

Note. Predictors in bold were statistically significant at the p < .05 level. Numbers above the diagonal are coefficients for support providers, whereas numbers below the diagonal are coefficients for support seekers. Where applicable, numbers in italics on the diagonal represent the correlation between the seeker and provider on the variable of interest. ES = emotional support; IS = informational support; TS = tangible support; NS = negative support; PSS = positive support seeking; NSS = negative support seeking.

Table 3. Results of Regression Analyses Predicting Support Seeking Behaviors.

Outcome	Predictor variable	*B*	*SE*	*t*	95% CI Low	95% CI High	*r*	*p*
PDSS	Attachment anxiety	–0.17	0.12	–1.34	–0.43	0.08	.15	.18
	Attachment avoidance	–0.18	0.19	–0.95	–0.56	0.20	.11	.35
	Gender	0.21	0.24	0.88	–0.27	0.70	.10	.38
	Seeker autonomy	**0.04**	**0.02**	**2.76**	**0.01**	**0.07**	**.30**	**.007**
	Provider autonomy	0.00	0.01	0.11	–0.03	0.03	.01	.91
NDSS	Attachment anxiety	0.03	0.18	0.18	–0.32	0.38	.02	.86
	Attachment avoidance	0.23	0.26	0.87	–0.29	0.75	.09	.39
	Gender	0.49	0.33	1.47	–0.17	1.14	.17	.15
	Seeker autonomy	**–0.05**	**0.02**	**–2.43**	**–0.09**	**–0.009**	**.27**	**.02**
	Provider autonomy	0.02	0.02	0.91	–0.02	0.05	.11	.37

Note. n = 76 for both analyses. CI = confidence interval; PDSS = positive direct support seeking; NDSS = negative direct support seeking. Predictors in bold were statistically significant.

We next tested whether seeker and provider relationship autonomy predicted outcomes of the support interactions—perceived support (provided or received), the self-reported stressfulness of the interaction, and change in positive and negative mood—controlling for behavior during the interaction. We conducted a multiple linear regression for each outcome for both the seeker and the provider. Each regression included the individual's gender, attachment insecurity, relationship autonomy, their partner's relationship autonomy, and all of the observed support behaviors. For the analyses examining positive and negative affect as outcomes, we also included preinteraction positive or negative affect as a control variable, which enabled us to examine change in mood as a result of the interaction.

Results of these analyses are presented in Tables 6 and 7. Support seekers with greater relationship autonomy reported receiving more support from their partner (B = 0.09, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.05, 0.12], β = .55, p < .001, r = .51), experienced lower stress during the interaction (B = −0.06, 95% CI = [−0.09, −0.01], β = −.37, p = .004, r = .33), and experienced increases in positive affect (B = 0.03, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.05], β = .23, p = .02, r = .28). Importantly, even after controlling for gender, attachment insecurity, and observer-coded support provision and seeking behavior during the interactions, these effects were (a) statistically significant and (b) moderate to large in size. Support provider autonomy was not significantly associated with any of the seeker outcomes we tested with the exception of perceived

Table 4. Results of Regression Analyses Predicting Support Provision Behaviors.

Outcome	Predictor variable	*B*	*SE*	*t*	95% CI Low	95% CI High	*r*	*p*
Emotional support	Attachment anxiety	−0.20	0.14	−1.47	−0.47	0.07	.17	.15
	Attachment avoidance	−0.13	0.22	−0.61	−0.57	0.30	.07	.54
	Gender	−0.22	0.27	−0.84	−0.76	0.31	.10	.41
	Seeker autonomy	0.03	0.02	1.69	−0.01	0.06	.19	.10
	Provider autonomy	0.01	0.02	0.35	−0.03	0.04	.04	.73
Informational support	Attachment anxiety	−0.26	0.14	−1.78	−0.54	0.03	.20	.08
	Attachment avoidance	−0.17	0.23	−0.76	−0.63	0.28	.09	.45
	Gender	0.45	0.28	1.62	−0.11	1.02	.18	.11
	Seeker autonomy	**0.05**	**0.02**	**3.19**	**0.02**	**0.09**	**.35**	**.002**
	Provider autonomy	−0.02	0.02	−1.05	−0.05	0.02	.12	.30
Tangible support	Attachment anxiety	−0.17	0.17	−0.99	−0.50	0.17	.11	.32
	Attachment avoidance	0.06	0.27	0.21	−0.48	0.60	.02	.83
	Gender	0.20	0.33	0.60	−0.46	0.86	.07	.55
	Seeker autonomy	**0.04**	**0.02**	**2.29**	**0.01**	**0.08**	**.26**	**.03**
	Provider autonomy	0.02	0.02	1.01	−0.02	0.06	.12	.32
Negative support	**Attachment anxiety**	**0.32**	**0.10**	**3.10**	**0.11**	**0.52**	**.34**	**.003**
	Attachment avoidance	0.02	0.16	0.11	−0.31	0.35	.01	.91
	Gender	−0.11	0.20	−0.54	−0.51	0.29	.06	.59
	Seeker autonomy	**−0.03**	**0.01**	**−2.31**	**−0.05**	**0.00**	**.26**	**.02**
	Provider autonomy	0.00	0.01	0.28	−0.02	0.03	.03	.78

Note. n = 76 for all analyses. Predictors in bold were statistically significant. Approximate effect size r was computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: r = square root ($t^2 / t^2 + df$).

Table 5. Indirect Effects of Seeker Autonomy on Support Provision Behaviors Through Support Seeking Behaviors.

Outcome	Mediator	Estimate	*SE*	Bias-corrected confidence intervals Low	Bias-corrected confidence intervals High
Emotional support	**PDSS**	**0.02**	**0.001**	**0.003**	**0.05**
	NDSS	−0.007	0.007	−0.03	0.03
Informational support	**PDSS**	**0.016**	**0.01**	**0.003**	**0.05**
	NDSS	−0.005	0.007	−0.03	0.002
Tangible support	**PDSS**	**0.024**	**0.013**	**0.005**	**0.05**
	NDSS	−0.017	0.013	−0.05	0.001
Negative support	PDSS	0.003	0.004	−0.004	0.013
	NDSS	−0.011	0.008	−0.031	0.001

Note. All analyses controlled for seeker gender, provider and seeker attachment anxiety and avoidance, and provider relationship autonomy. Estimates are based on 1,000 bootstrapped subsamples. Lines in bold indicate that the indirect effect of seeker relationship autonomy was statistically significant on the specified outcome through support seeking behavior. PDSS = positive direct support seeking; NDSS = negative direct support seeking.

stress; surprisingly, support seekers with partners who had greater relationship autonomy tended to rate the interactions as *more* stressful (B = 0.04, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.08], β = .30, p = .02, r = .28).[2] Overall, even when accounting for their and their partner's behavior, support seekers with a self-determined investment in their relationship tended to experience and interpret support interactions more positively than those with lower relationship autonomy.

After controlling for gender, attachment insecurity, and seeker and provider behavior during the interaction, provider autonomy predicted a decrease in negative affect after the interaction (B = −0.01, 95% CI = [−0.03, −0.001], β = −.21, p = .047, r = .23) and marginally predicted greater perceived support provided during the interaction (B = −0.04, 95% CI = [−0.03, 0.08], β = .24, p = .07, r = .21). Seeker autonomy also marginally predicted lower perceived stress (B = −0.03, 95% CI = [−0.06, .01], β = −.23, p = .09, r = .19) and decreases in negative affect for support providers (B = −0.01, 95% CI = [−0.03, .002], β = −.18, p = .09, r = .20). These results indicate that, even when statistically adjusting for a number of important determinants of interaction success, support providers with greater autonomous motivation reported feeling less negative mood and (marginally) reported providing more support to their partner during these interactions. Moreover, *seekers'* greater autonomous motivation predicted greater positive mood and lower stress in support providers.

Discussion

A large literature demonstrates that effective social support among intimate relationship partners plays a crucial role in

Table 6. Regression Analyses Predicting Support Seekers' Outcomes While Controlling for Behavior During the Interactions.

Predictor	Seeker perceived support		Seeker perceived stress		Seeker positive affect		Seeker negative affect	
	B	*r*	*B*	*r*	*B*	*r*	*B*	*r*
Gender	−0.11	.05	0.61†	.22	−0.08	.05	0.23	.19
Seeker attachment anxiety	0.00	.00	0.04	.03	−0.03	.03	−0.02	.03
Seeker attachment avoidance	−0.04	.02	0.17	.09	0.27†	.22	−0.13	.13
Preinteraction PA or NA	—	—	—	—	0.92***	.73	0.59***	.53
Seeker relationship autonomy	**0.09*****	.51	**−0.06****	.33	**0.03***	.28	−0.01	.10
Provider relationship autonomy	−0.02	.17	0.04*	.28	0.00	.009	0.01	.08
Observed emotional support	−0.05	.05	−0.01	.01	−0.08	.11	0.00	.00
Observed negative support	−0.05	.04	−0.10	.06	−0.04	.05	0.09	.14
Observed informational support	0.25†	.22	0.17	.14	0.17*	.23	0.01	.02
Observed tangible support	0.08	.08	−0.13	.13	0.09	.14	−0.09†	.20
Observed NDSS	−0.12	.11	0.26†	.23	−0.11	.17	0.02	.04
Observed PDSS	−0.03	.02	0.04	.03	−0.11	.12	−0.02	.02

Note. n = 75 for all analyses. Bolded values indicate predicted effects. PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect; NDSS = negative direct support seeking. PDSS = positive direct support seeking.
$^{\dagger}p < .10$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 7. Regression Analyses Predicting Support Providers' Outcomes While Controlling for Behavior During the Interactions.

Predictor	Provider perceived support		Provider perceived stress		Provider positive affect		Provider negative affect	
	B	*r*	*B*	*r*	*B*	*r*	*B*	*r*
Gender	0.20	.07	−0.14	.07	0.09	.06	0.08	.09
Provider attachment anxiety	−0.03	.02	−0.05	.05	0.00	.006	−0.02	.04
Provider attachment avoidance	−0.22	.10	0.35†	.21	0.00	.004	−0.02	.03
Preinteraction PA or NA	—	—	—	—	0.76***	.76	0.62***	.56
Seeker relationship autonomy	0.03	.16	**−0.03**†	.19	0.01	.08	**−0.01**†	.20
Provider relationship autonomy	**0.04**†	.21	0.00	.03	0.00	.005	**−0.01***	.23
Observed emotional support	0.27	.19	0.00	.00	−0.02	.03	0.04	.074
Observed negative support	0.08	.05	0.04	.02	−0.10	.13	0.11	.18
Observed informational support	0.05	.04	−0.10	.10	−0.06	.11	−0.01	.03
Observed tangible support	0.00	.003	0.05	.11	0.12†	.22	−0.02	.06
Observed NSS	−0.19	.14	0.08	.06	0.05	.09	0.02	.04
Observed PSS	0.01	.006	0.00	.00	0.17†	.21	0.00	.00

Note. n = 74 for all analyses, with the exception of the analysis predicting perceived stress, for which the n = 76. Bolded values indicate predicted effects. PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect; NSS = negative support seeking; PSS = positive direct support seeking.
$^{\dagger}p < .10$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{***}p < .001$.

relationship quality and personal well-being (Cohen, 2004; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2015). As such, it is important that researchers identify factors which can promote effective social support seeking and provision in the context of intimate relationships. Based on SDT, the current study was the first to examine how relationship autonomy (a) contributes to social support seeking and provision behaviors using a well-established observational procedure, and (b) influences how people subjectively experience social support interactions. A number of novel findings emerged.

Relationship Autonomy and Behavior in Support Interactions

First, supporting Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 1a, we found that people with greater self-determination toward their relationship tended to seek support in a more positive manner, which then meant their partner responded with greater emotional, informational, and tangible assistance. That is, there were indirect partner effects from the support seeker's relationship autonomy on the support provider's behavior, through the support seeker's behavior. Altogether, these

results suggest that when people have a self-determined, authentic investment in their relationships, it translates to more open, direct, and positive behaviors when they share problems, concerns, or goals with partners. In turn, partners are able to use these clear, positive, and direct cues to respond in a productive or comforting way. Our findings are consistent with research demonstrating that individuals with greater relationship autonomy tend to interact with their partner in a more open, understanding, and less defensive manner when conflict arises (Knee et al., 2005). The open, nondefensive orientation toward their romantic relationship that is central to autonomous motivation also has a positive influence on other processes, such as seeking support, that are critical to relationship maintenance.

Surprisingly, the autonomous motivation of the support provider was not significantly associated with their behaviors in the interaction. This finding lends further credence to theoretical and empirical arguments for the importance of the support seeker in determining the success of the process (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Barbee et al., 1998; Don et al., 2013). Behaviors of the support recipient are crucial to how partners are able, and motivated, to respond (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Moreover, because support seekers are often responsible for initiating the support interaction, we believe that how they approach this behavior likely sets the tone for the rest of the exchange. Unsurprisingly, providing support in an effective manner is challenging and frustrating when the support seeker is closed, unclear, and negative. Accordingly, we found the behaviors and motivations of the support *seekers* predicted provider behaviors, rather than the providers' relationship autonomy.

Relationship Autonomy and Outcomes of Support Interactions

We also demonstrated that relationship autonomy plays an important role in how individuals subjectively experience support interactions. We found that support seekers with greater relationship autonomy tended to feel that they receive more support during the interactions, perceive the interactions as less stressful, and experience increases in positive mood, even when controlling for their and their partner's behavior during these interactions. Moreover, effect sizes indicated that relationship autonomy had a medium to large influence on these outcomes and was generally a stronger predictor than attachment style. Support providers with greater relationship autonomy similarly experienced less negative mood and marginally felt they provided more support to their partner, even when controlling for behavior during the interaction. Interestingly, providers also marginally experienced lower stress and negative affect when their partners were high in relationship autonomy.

Consistent with SDT, these results demonstrate that individuals who are high in autonomous motivation tend to approach, experience, and interpret support interactions in light of their open, nonjudgmental, and growth-minded orientation toward their relationship (Knee et al., 2013). Whereas disclosing ones thoughts and feelings or listening to a partner in need of support may sometimes feel like a burden or obligation, individuals who are autonomously motivated likely approach support interactions as opportunities to learn about their partner, enhance relationship skills, and grow as a couple (Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Knee et al., 2002). As such, these individuals are likely to view support interactions as something fundamentally important, rewarding, and enjoyable. Prior research examining the outcomes of support interactions tends to emphasize that the success of these interactions depends primarily on behavior, including factors such as the quality, timing, and empathetic accuracy of the support that is provided (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). While behavior is clearly important, our results suggest that it is also crucial to consider individual difference variables that influence how people subjectively approach, interpret, and experience these interactions. Even timely, empathetic, and well-intentioned support may fail to alleviate the stress or boost the mood of someone who approaches a support interaction with sense of obligation, pressure, and control. Our results thus contribute more broadly to the social support literature by emphasizing that any behavior that is enacted during social support interactions must be considered in light of the characteristics of the individual who is receiving, experiencing, and interpreting it.

Our analyses examining how relationship autonomy predicts the outcomes of support interactions also help to clarify how relationship autonomy influences support provision behavior. Specifically, contrary to our hypotheses, we found that support providers' relationship autonomy did not predict their own support provision behavior. In addition to emphasizing the importance of the support seeker's behavior and motivation (as discussed above), another potential explanation for this surprising finding is that support providers with greater relationship autonomy tended to feel they provided more support during the interactions, even controlling for their actual behavior. This suggests that while relationship autonomy promotes better subjective experiences (e.g., lower negative mood) for support providers during support interactions, it may also lead them to *over-perceive* the amount of support they are actually providing to their partner. That is, relationship autonomy may have benefits and drawbacks for support providers in the sense that the open, nondefensive, and growth-oriented mind-set conferred by greater autonomy may be counterbalanced by support providers' overly positive perception of their own behavior during support interactions. This would explain why seeker but not provider autonomy plays a positive role in promoting better behavior during interactions, but both seeker and provider autonomy promote better outcomes of support interactions. Indeed, Hadden et al. (2015) also found that relationship autonomy was linked to greater perceptions of support provision, but the current study was

the first to include both behaviors and self-reports of support interactions. Thus, future research should continue to explore whether relationship autonomy may actually lead individuals to over-perceive the amount of support they provide to their partners.

Finally, our findings represent a unique contribution to the support literature, because they remained significant even when controlling for attachment style, which prior research has shown to be an important predictor of individual differences in support provision, seeking, and the subjective experience of support interactions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009). Indeed, when examining effect sizes in our analyses, relationship autonomy was almost always a stronger predictor of behavior in and outcomes of the interactions. Our results therefore suggest that relationship autonomy is a practically meaningful and theoretically distinct predictor of how individuals behave in and experience support interactions, even when accounting for attachment style.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations to the current study. First, our sample was relatively small at the couple level. Although the study included 160 individuals, dyadic analyses require the couple to be the unit of measurement, meaning many of our analyses were underpowered. Although we were able to detect many significant associations, some of the marginally significant pathways may become significant in a larger sample. Our sample was also composed of a demographically homogeneous group of college students, and it is important that future research is conducted across cultures to determine whether the influence of relationship autonomy replicates, as predicted by SDT.

We selected the observed support behavior coding schedule following a well-established taxonomy of support (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Overall et al., 2010; Pasch et al., 1997). However, other types of support behaviors may be of interest to future researchers. For instance, Hammond and Overall (2015) examined the effects of support behaviors specifically relevant to autonomy, relatedness, and competence needs. More autonomous relationship motivation may be particularly relevant to people's provision of autonomy support (i.e., open, reflective discussion) rather than competence needs (i.e., encouragement of ability). Examining more specific support behaviors may provide further clarity into the precise way in which relationship autonomy enhances social support interactions.

Finally, we examined perceived support, perceived stress, mood, and perceived partner responsiveness immediately after the support interaction task. Our results therefore speak to the outcomes of short-term support interactions, but relationship autonomy likely also has important implications for long-term individual and relational well-being. Prior research demonstrates that more subtle forms of support have more delayed effects in promoting well-being of the recipient (e.g., Girme et al., 2013), and future research should seek to examine how relationship autonomy influences the outcomes of support interactions across time. For example, the open, growth-oriented mind-set of more autonomous relationship partners likely means that they will view support interactions more generally as means to maintain and enhance closeness with their partners. We suspect that individuals who are high in relationship autonomy will not only engage in more positive, and less negative, behaviors during support interactions but be more likely to initiate support interactions as a means to grow as an individual and as a couple.

Conclusion

The current study provided evidence for (a) the important role of the support seeker in establishing the effectiveness of support interactions, and (b) ways in which relationship autonomy prompts more positive relationship experiences. People's relationship autonomy fostered more open, direct support seeking, which, in turn, prompted greater levels of support from their romantic partners. Relationship autonomy also fostered more positive experiences of support interactions beyond observed behaviors, suggesting that people who are autonomously motivated to be in their relationships also benefit from simply interacting with their partners. These benefits of relationship autonomy were also distinct from people's attachment security, highlighting how people's intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation toward their relationships is key to understanding the interactions between intimate partners that are critical for their own well-being, their partner's well-being, and the functioning of their close relationships.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available at the PSPB website.

Notes

1. We also tested the hypothesized effects without controlling for attachment insecurity and gender, and the overall results remained consistent when controls were not included.
2. Given that only one of the four partner effects that we tested was significant, and it was significant in the opposite direction that we hypothesized, we suspected that this was a suppressor effect. As such, we conducted a supplemental regression with no control variables in which only seeker and provider relationship autonomy predicted seeker perceived stress. As expected, in this analysis, provider autonomy did not significantly predict seeker stress (p = .15). We will therefore not interpret this effect in the "Discussion" section.

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