

Relationship Differentiation and Well-Being

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Abstract

Research on relationships generally focuses on perceptions of a single relationship type, most often romantic relationships. Consequently, little is known about how individuals perceive the interrelation among varying relationship types and the consequences of these perceptions for the self. The present research introduces the construct of relationship differentiation—a measure of how much similarity or overlap an individual perceives between different relationship types. Perceiving specific relationship types as distinct can lead to the perception that specific relationships uniquely serve particular social support functions and can reduce individuals' ability to flexibly recruit support when needed. Thus, we hypothesized that relationship differentiation would be associated with lower well-being as result of its association with perceived social support. In two studies, participants completed measures of relationship differentiation and an index of well-being, which included self-esteem, satisfaction with life (Study 1), loneliness (Studies 1 and 2), and relationship satisfaction (Study 2). Across both studies, relationship differentiation was associated with lower scores on standardized composites of well-being. In Study 2, participants also reported their perceptions of social support. As predicted, perceived social support significantly mediated the association between relationship differentiation and well-being. The present research provides an initial step in demonstrating how perceptions of relationship differentiation may link to perceptions of support and well-being.

Relationship Differentiation and Well-Being

Why do some individuals flourish after moving away from friends and family while other, equally sociable individuals, instead succumb to loneliness and homesickness for those they left behind? Why do some individuals seem to flexibly seek out social support from whomever is available, while others limit themselves to one relationship partner or relationship type for support? One explanation for differences such as these may be found in how individuals cognitively represent their relationships—their relationship schemas—as well as how these schemas are structured or organized. For example, schemas within a particular domain can vary in the extent to which they are perceived to overlap (i.e., complexity or similarity vs. differentiation) and in the way positive and negative traits are organized (e.g., compartmentalization; Showers, 1992; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007). Although no research has examined the role of these structural properties in the context of relationship beliefs, substantial work in related areas, such as the self, suggests that perceptions of overlap or differentiation between varying relationships or relationship types (such as friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships) may have implications for individuals' relationship behaviors and well-being outcomes. Within the relationships literature, although schematic structure has largely been overlooked, there is some suggestive research on within-person attachment variability.

Attachment Variability

Relational schemas, such as attachment models, encompass a variety of internal beliefs about relationships, including behavioral scripts, if-then rules, and implicit theories (Baldwin, 1992; Collins & Read, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As a result of their influence on individuals' perceptions and expectations, attachment models ultimately affect many relationship outcomes including relationship status, relationship satisfaction, commitment,

preferences for and perceptions of social support, and even an individual's own ability to provide support (Herzberg et al., 1999; Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002; Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Oriña, 2007).

Attachment models develop in early childhood through repeated interactions with caregivers and are generalized to one's adult relationships (Collins & Read, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment models consist of two dimensions: the model of self, which assesses the extent to which an individual feels unworthy of love, and the model of other, which assesses the extent to which an individual mistrusts the responsiveness and caring of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Attachment models and other relational schemas guide how individuals construe their social world: where they focus attention, what behaviors they remember their partner perform, and their expectations for future interactions. This biased information processing subsequently affects the individual's own feelings about a relationship and their behaviors within it. Thus, an individual with a negative model of other does not simply possess a schema that attachment figures are unresponsive, but will also avoid relying on others due to that mistrust, and may even mistrust a partner's positive responses by attributing relationship-threatening motives to the behavior (Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006). In this way, although attachment models are rooted in reality, they can still lead an individual to draw inaccurate conclusions or form incorrect expectations of others' behaviors and supportiveness.

Despite this shared influence from caregiver relations in childhood, adult attachment models may differ for different relationship partners. For example, Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen (2003) demonstrated through confirmatory factor analysis that there is considerable variability in attachment within an individual's various relationships, and that attachment models are

organized hierarchically. In addition to forming unique attachment schemas for specific relationship partners, individuals also possess mid-level schemas of various relationship *types*, such as romantic relationships and close friendships (see Figure 1). Similarly, LaGuardia, Ryan, Couchman, and Deci (2000) examined the variation in individuals' relationship-specific models for six different attachment figures. They found considerable within-person variability in attachment security and also an inconsistent link between attachment variability and poorer well-being (this link was significant in only one of their two studies). This association existed only for attachment models of others, and not the self, suggesting that any link that may exist between attachment variability and well-being would be due to perceptions of others' responsiveness rather than perceptions of one's own worth. Although the researchers did not draw any conclusions regarding this potential exploratory finding, the findings lend some support to the present notion that relationship schema differentiation may predict well-being as a result of decreased perceptions of social support.

This research highlights that individuals differ in the extent to which they show variability in their relationship schemas and that this may have important implications for relationship processes and well-being. Although much of the variability found in attachment schemas results from idiographic differences between an individual's actual relationships, this variability also requires that individuals first structure the relational world into discrete relational categories that allow for the perception of these differences. If an individual instead perceived all close relationships as being one overarching group, then this individual would necessarily have a single attachment schema and no variability. Given the dearth of research on the extent to which individuals tend to differentiate the relational world into relationship categories rather than

viewing all relationships as similar and overlapping, it is useful to look at parallel schema research in non-relationship domains.

Schematic Structure

Over the past 30 years, research on schematic structures has focused almost exclusively on the self (whether at the individual, relational, or collective level). Research on the self has examined numerous dimensions along which schemas may be organized and how organization influences individuals' processing beyond the content of the schemas (Kim, 2006; Linville, 1985; 1987; McConnell & Strain, 2007; Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Although there are many different perspectives on schematic structure that vary in their operationalization, measurement, and attention to the content of the schema, they agree on the notion that individuals hold multiple self-schemas (Markus, 1977; Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnell & Strain, 2007) that vary structurally in complexity and differentiation. Thus, these various literatures provide convergent insight into schematic structures that can be extended to the question of how relationship differentiation may relate to well-being.

Multiple Self-Aspects Framework. The multiple self-aspects framework is the newest perspective in examining self-schematic structure (MSF; McConnell, 2011; McConnell, Shoda, & Skulborstad, 2012). According to the MSF, the self is comprised of multiple context-dependent selves that are each associated with their own traits and any trait may or may not be shared between self-aspects. Activation of a particular self-aspect activates its associated traits, and feedback about a particular trait will alter evaluations of all the self-concepts implicated by that trait. This research provides a useful parallel for understanding how individuals may mentally represent their social world. Similar to the structuring of the self-concept, individuals may divide the social world into few or many relationship types and these relationship types may

be viewed as sharing or not sharing various relationship characteristics. To the extent that an individual perceives these relationships as different, the individual will perceive fewer shared characteristics (such as social support provision) among these relationship types.

Self-complexity. The multiple self-aspects framework stems from work by Linville (1985; 1987) on the complexity of self-schemas, which made predictions regarding how schematic structure influences well-being (for a review, see McConnell & Strain, 2007; Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002). A schematic structure in which an individual has a large number of self-aspects and maintains considerable distinction between them is considered to have self-complexity under this framework (Linville, 1987). Linville (1987) posited that high self-complexity would buffer well-being during stressful events (and conversely buffer the positive effects on well-being of positive events) and low self-complexity would allow for affective spillover (Kim, 2006; McConnell, Strain, Brown, & Rydell, 2009). However, a recent meta-analysis confirmed only the latter finding (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002).

Although self-complexity research represented a popular method for assessing the structural properties of a schematic network, there are considerable criticisms of the methodology used to measure self-complexity, as well as of the clarity of the construct. First, because self-complexity is intended to refer simultaneously to how extensively an individual structures the world, as well as the amount of distinction perceived between the categories, this measurement (known as the H-statistic; Scott, 1969) obscures the main effects that category generation and perceived distinctiveness may have by confounding them into a single number. Second, although self-complexity was intended to capture a unidimensional construct of the distinctiveness between categories, self-complexity is instead positively correlated with perceived *overlap* between self-aspects (Rafaeli-Mor, Gotlib, & Revelle, 1999) and is

multidimensional, consisting of a positive and negative factor (McConnell & Strain, 2007; McConnell et al., 2009; Woolfolk, Novolany, Gara, Allen, & Polino, 1995).

Regardless of the limitations in the conceptualization and measurement of self-complexity in the past, the construct also offers interesting parallels for the examination of relationship schema structure. Just as perceiving overlap between self-categories allows for spillover regarding one's affective responses to positive and negative events, perceiving overlap between relationship categories (i.e. relationship types) should allow for greater spillover or substitutability for relationship needs when they are salient. For example, if an individual is in need of social support and their primary attachment figure is unavailable, an individual with low relationship differentiation (greater relationship overlap or similarity) should be quicker and more likely to move onto (or "spill over" to) another relationship partner to obtain that support. In this manner, perceptions of relationship similarity or overlap may predict greater well-being, as those individuals who are more flexible in their perceptions of support provision may be more likely to perceive that support is available, and furthermore may actually obtain the support they desire.

Self-Concept Differentiation. Another offshoot of self-complexity is self-concept differentiation, which reflects the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as having different personality characteristics across different social roles rather than integrating their personality across roles (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993). Although similar to self-complexity at first glance, these two constructs differ in their conceptualizations, measurement, and predicted relation to well-being. First, self-concept differentiation was conceptualized as representing either a fragmentation or specialization of the self, rather than integration of the self. Whereas specialization would be predicted to result in a positive association between self-

concept differentiation and well-being, fragmentation of the self would be predicted to directly and negatively affect well-being and adjustment. Supporting the idea of fragmentation, Donahue and colleagues (1993) found that individuals with high self-concept differentiation displayed lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression, while individuals low in self-concept differentiation displayed greater self-esteem and lower levels of depression. This relation was found both concurrently and longitudinally, such that well-being measures taken at age 21 correlated with self-concept differentiation at age 52 (Donahue et al., 1993).

The association between self-complexity and self-concept differentiation is not entirely clear, although one study found a non-significant negative correlation between relational self-complexity and relational self-concept differentiation ($r = -.16, n.s.$; Kim, 2006), and separate research from the two domains indicate that complexity and differentiation may have opposing associations with self-esteem, such that self-complexity positively correlates with self-esteem, and self-concept differentiation negatively correlates with self-esteem. This suggests the two constructs may be unrelated, but neither theory's conceptualized association with well-being is strongly borne out by data in the field (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002).

Regardless of the association between self-complexity and self-concept differentiation, we can again draw parallels to the differentiation of relationship schemas. Just as an individual who perceives each of their selves as having distinct personalities may feel fragmented, an individual who differentiates between various relationship types may have a fragmented social network¹. Each fragment or relationship type may be perceived as providing a unique function or

¹ An individual may also fragment their social network by keeping their various relationships separate (e.g., “not mixing work with pleasure”). Although this may be the most parallel example to self-concept differentiation, here we refer to fragmentation in regard to an individual's perceptions of what various relationship types are like. Based on other schema research, this schematic fragmentation would have a direct effect on an individual's behaviors toward and expectations of their relationships (and consequently their well-being), whereas the former concept of fragmentation is unrelated to an individual's relationship schemas, as they could keep relationship partners apart, yet still feel they all provide similar support.

form of support with minimal perceived substitutability between these relationship types. This further supports the notion that relationship differentiation should be associated with lower well-being, as fragmenting support across one's social network limits an individual's perceived flexibility in support seeking, and consequently the likelihood that they will obtain support when needed.

Social Identity Complexity. Social identity complexity is the last perspective on schematic structure that is relevant to understanding the potential association between relationship differentiation and well-being. Social identity complexity is a conceptual transposition of self-complexity to the level of the collective self. Thus, social identity complexity refers to “an individual's subjective representation of the interrelationships among his or her multiple group identities” by assessing the “degree of overlap perceived to exist between groups of which a person is simultaneously a member” (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Miller, Brewer, & Arbuckle, 2009; Roccas & Brewer, 2002, p.88).

Social identity complexity encompasses the perceived similarity of prototypical norms and beliefs of the different groups, as well as perceptions of the degree of membership overlap between the groups. Social identity complexity can therefore be contrasted from self-complexity and self-concept differentiation in two important ways. The most easily apparent is the difference in assessment. Social identity complexity can be measured through two self-reports: a measure of similarity in which participants indicate the similarity between the different pairs of groups on a Likert scale, and a measure of overlap in which participants estimate the amount of membership overlap between the different pairs of groups by having participants indicate a percentage of overlap numerically, or through the selection of an appropriate image from sets of overlapping circles (e.g., “How many individuals who are Catholic are also American?”). These measures,

unlike self-complexity or self-concept differentiation, thus reflect individuals' explicit reports as to the extent of their perceptions of differentiation or overlap. Another difference is that although self-complexity and self-concept differentiation attempt to measure differentiation (although as mentioned previously, self-complexity seems to capture overlap), social identity complexity measures overlap. "Complexity" is said to exist when an individual perceives overlap between the groups and their membership, as this means that another person could be classified simultaneously as an out-group member in regard to one social identity and an in-group member in regard to another social identity. According to Miller and colleagues (2009), this perception of overlap prohibits a simple division of the world into "us" and "them" and consequently is associated with greater out-group tolerance.

Extending social identity complexity to relationships, the perception that various relationship types are similar or overlapping should be inversely related to discretely categorizing them into "useful" versus "not useful" for one's social support needs. Thus, an individual may be more likely to turn to a variety of relationship types for social support if a particularly preferred relationship is unavailable. Finally, although it remains unclear whether differentiation and overlap are orthogonal constructs or opposing anchors on a bipolar scale, to be consistent with social identity complexity and other past research, the constructs will be treated as opposite ends of a bipolar scale and differentiation will be conceptualized as the reverse-score of similarity or overlap.

Perceived Social Support

Individuals' relationship schemas can influence well-being indirectly through their impact on individuals' perceptions, expectations, and attributions of relationship behaviors. For example, attachment models of others influence individuals' perceived social support—their

generalized expectations about whether others are likely to aid them or provide emotional support (Sarason, Shearin, Pierce, & Sarason, 1987). In turn, perceived social support influences well-being, including loneliness (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1990), depression (Mickelson, 2001), and coping with stress (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). This link between perceived social support and well-being is not mediated by received social support (Kaul & Lakey, 2003) or a direct result of received support (Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007; Lakey & Lutz, 1996; Reinhardt & Blieszner, 2000). This highlights that perceived social support can be conceptualized as a stable personality characteristic (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990) that drives individuals' perceptions of and attributions for others' behaviors. In this way, an individual who believes support is available if needed (whether that is true or not) might feel enabled to resolve their issues on their own (Bolger et al., 2000).²

Various measures of perceived social support, such as the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ; Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983) and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), assess perceived social support by capturing how many relationships are perceived to provide various types of support, as well as one's evaluation of the support available. For example, the SSQ has participants name each person who can provide a type of support, and the final score is a reflection of both satisfaction with the support and the number of people who were perceived as offering support. Similarly, the MSPSS has participants respond about the adequacy of social support from three different relationship types (friends, family, and significant other) and creates an average score from these responses. Thus, perceived social support is the perception that many individuals can provide

² Another factor that may explain the lack of consistent association between received support and well-being may be the conflation of received support that is invisible with received support that was unwanted or negatively impacted an individual's sense of self-worth or efficacy. Similarly, measures of received support do not distinguish between support that was sought out and support proffered spontaneously.

support in a satisfactory manner. Individuals who consider only one relationship type as capable of offering a particular type of support, such as those who view each relationship type as different (versus similar) would therefore score low on measures of perceived social support and would be expected to report lower levels of well-being.

Relationship Differentiation

Relationships are natural categories: Individuals naturally categorize individuals by their relationships, just as they divide others by race or gender (Sedikides, Olsen, & Reis, 1993). Just as individuals may perceive their self-concepts or social groups as distinct, individuals who perceive considerable distinction (rather than similarity or overlap) between various relationship types can be thought to be high in *relationship differentiation*. Relationship differentiation therefore refers to how the schemas for different relationship types are structured within the schematic network. Similar to social identity complexity, having high relationship differentiation would mean an individual perceives various relationship types as having distinct, rather than similar prototypes, and little overlap among them. For an individual who sees relationships as highly differentiated, every relationship type would be viewed as having a distinct prototype, leaving little fluidity between categories. An individual with low relationship differentiation on the other hand, would instead construe the relational world under more inclusive categories, such as “close others.” This lack of differentiation (in other words, this overlap or similarity between relationship types) would allow for flexibility, especially in regards to perceiving social support.

Like other measures of complexity or differentiation, relationship differentiation may stem, in part, from a general cognitive tendency to structure one’s world (e.g. cognitive complexity; Kelly, 1955), but should represent a distinct construct with its own predictive utility. One aspect of the cognitive tendency to structure the world that may be particularly relevant to

relationship differentiation is the need for simple structure. Individuals with a high need for simple structure decision want to organize their worlds in a simple, structured manner with clear categories (Neuberg, Judice, & West, 1997; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Although general cognitive preferences to structure the world may impact domain-specific structuring, research in related areas suggests that an association between relationship differentiation and well-being should not be due to the general need for simple structure. For example, although self-complexity was associated with general cognitive complexity, self-complexity uniquely predicted well-being (Linville, 1987). Similarly, social identity complexity was found to have divergent and unique associations with out-group tolerance (Miller et al., 2009). Relationship differentiation should similarly predict well-being above and beyond an individual's general cognitive tendency to structure the world in simple and clearly defined ways.

Relationship differentiation and well-being. Extending from research in other domains, relationship differentiation may be expected to negatively relate to well-being. Just as low differentiation (high similarity/overlap) between one's self-concepts is associated with self-esteem spillover, perceptions of relationship overlap may allow individuals flexibility in "spilling over" across relationship types to meet their social support needs. These perceptions of social support provision are crucial because, although most relationships may be capable of providing support, an individual's expectations of this support provision will influence an individual's satisfaction with their social network, and possibly whether the individual would choose to approach these relationships for that support. An individual with low relationship differentiation (high similarity or overlap) would perceive various relationship types, such as close friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships, as interchangeable alternatives. This perception should have implications for perceptions of support provision, and consequently impact an

individual's well-being. Thus, just as self-concept differentiation may have negative implications for self-esteem, relationship differentiation should have negative implications for well-being measures related to relationship processes, including self-esteem, satisfaction with life and with one's relationships, and loneliness.

Present Research

Although research on the self has addressed the implications of schematic structure, research on relationships has largely overlooked how individuals structure their relational world. This is surprising given that social support researchers have long argued that relationship beliefs are comparative and relative: we cannot understand an individual's feelings or decisions in regard to one relationship without also understanding their perceptions of the other relationships in their social network (e.g., Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Pierce et al., 1990). Given that relationships do not exist in isolation, examining the schematic structure provides a new lens through which we can better understand relationship processes, especially in the context of perceived social support and well-being.

The present research aims to examine the hypothesized link between relationship differentiation and well-being. First, we will demonstrate that greater perceptions of relationship differentiation (lower perceived similarity/overlap) are negatively associated with well-being (Studies 1 & 2). We will also demonstrate that this link is not solely due to general cognitive tendencies to structure one's world (Study 1). Finally, we will demonstrate that this link is mediated by decreased perceptions in perceived social support across different relationship types (Study 2).

Study 1

To establish the link between relationship differentiation and well-being, for Study 1 participants self-reported their perceptions of the similarity between three relationship types (i.e. friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships), as well as their feelings of loneliness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem. To demonstrate that this link is not due to general cognitive tendencies to structure the world into simple, discrete categories, participants also completed a measure of the need for simple structure.

Method

Participants. In exchange for partial course credit, 202 students (49 male, 144 female, 9 unreported) from the University of California, Davis participated in this laboratory study.

Materials. Relationship differentiation. To measure the degree of perceived distinctness of relationship categories, participants indicated their perception of the similarity between three specific relationship types: family relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships.³ Participants answered the three questions on six-point Likert scales from “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly” ($\alpha = .66$) comparing these relationship types (e.g., “How similar is a romantic relationship to a friendship?”). Scores were averaged and reverse-coded into a measure of relationship differentiation in which larger scores indicate greater differentiation (i.e., less perceived similarity) between relationship types (see Appendix A).

Well-being. To assess whether relationship differentiation predicts an individual’s general well-being, participants completed measures of loneliness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem, as these constructs are strongly linked to well-being (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991; Pavot & Diener, 1993; Schimmack & Diener, 2003). To assess loneliness, participants completed the

³ These three types were selected because research has already established that attachment schemas may be organized under these mid-level labels (Overall et al., 2003).

UCLA Loneliness Scale- Version 3 (Russell, 1996) which assesses the extent to which an individual feels as if they lack connectedness or belonging ($\alpha = .91$). Participants responded to 20 questions such as, “How often do you feel alone,” and “How often do you feel close to people” (reverse-coded) on four-point Likert scales from “never” to “always.” After creating the overall loneliness index, scores were reverse-coded so that greater numbers would reflect greater well-being (and lower loneliness).

To measure life satisfaction, participants completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Participants rated five items such as “I am satisfied with my life,” and “In most ways my life is close to my ideal” on seven-point Likert scales from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” ($\alpha = .86$). Responses were averaged into a measure of life satisfaction. To assess self-esteem, participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and rated their agreement with ten statements such as, “I feel that I have a number of good qualities,” and “I feel I do not have much to be proud of” (reverse-coded) on five-point Likert scales from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” ($\alpha = .86$). The measures of loneliness (reverse-coded), life satisfaction, and self-esteem were each standardized and averaged into a composite measure of well-being in which higher values indicated greater well-being ($\alpha = .79$).

Need for simple structure. To assess a general cognitive need for structure, participants completed the Need for Simple Structure factor of the Need for Closure Scale (NCS; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). The Need for Simple Structure subscale measures the desire to structure one’s world, such as through organizing it into discrete categories, and is comprised of 35 items from the need for order, need for predictability, discomfort with ambiguity, and close-

mindedness subscales (NFSS; Neuberg et al., 1997; Roets, Van Hiel, & Cornelis, 2006).⁴

Participants rated statements such as, “I think that having clear rules and order at work is essential for success,” and reverse-scored, “I like to have friends who are unpredictable,” on six-point Likert scales from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Responses were averaged into an index of the need for simple structure ($\alpha = .80$).

Procedure

After consenting, participants completed the measure of relationship differentiation followed by the measure of the need for simple structure. Finally, participants completed the three well-being measures in a randomized order.

Results and Discussion

To examine the association between relationship differentiation and well-being, relationship differentiation (centered) was regressed in Step 1 on the standardized well-being composite score, $\beta = -.12$, $se = .062$, $t(193) = -1.97$, $p = .050$, which indicated that relationship differentiation was associated with poorer well-being (See Table 1 for first-order correlations). Need for simple structure (centered) was entered as a predictor in the second step. The results indicated that the need for simple structure was significantly and negatively associated with well-being, $\beta = -.32$, $se = .14$, $t(192) = -2.31$, $p = .022$. Critically, the association between relationship differentiation and well-being remained marginally significant, $\beta = -.11$, $se = .061$, $t(192) = -1.83$, $p = .068$, which is consistent with the idea that the link between relationship differentiation

⁴ Although the original Need for Closure Scale was designed to be unidimensional, more recent research indicates the original items yield a multidimensional scale with two latent factors of the need for simple structure and decisiveness (Neuberg et al., 1997; Roets et al., 2006). As a confirmatory factor analysis on the present data did not support a unidimensional model, we did not include the theoretically irrelevant decisiveness factor in our analyses. However, treating the scale as unidimensional strengthens the reported association between relationship differentiation and well-being.

and well-being is not simply due to their general tendency to structure their world into discrete categories.⁵

Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to conceptually replicate the results of Study 1 and expand upon them to show that the link between relationship differentiation and well-being is mediated by perceived social support. In addition, to improve upon the measure of relationship differentiation, three additional items were included to measure participants' perceptions of the amount of overlap between romantic relationships, close friendships, and family relationships to create a six-item relationship similarity measure. This measure has the added benefit of capturing individuals' visual, intuitive understanding of the overlap between various relationship types. Finally, Study 2 utilized measures of relationship satisfaction, in addition to loneliness, to assess other aspects of well-being.

Method

Participants. As a class exercise option for extra credit, 140 participants (48 male, 92 female) from a general psychology class at the University of California, Davis completed this study online.

Materials. *Relationship differentiation.* As in Study 1, participants indicated the similarity between three specific relationship types: family relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships. They also completed three additional items adapted from the Social Identity Complexity measure (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) and Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). For these items, participants were presented with seven numbered pairs of circles that overlapped to varying degrees and each circle was labeled as one

⁵ Given the relatively low levels of internal reliability in the measure of relationship differentiation, the reported association between relationship differentiation and well-being may be attenuated and appear smaller than it truly is. I return to this issue in the General Discussion.

of the three relationships types (See Appendix B). Greater values indicated that the participant perceived greater overlap between the two relationship types. The three similarity and three overlap items were averaged together and reverse-coded to form a new measure of relationship differentiation that had a stronger internal reliability ($\alpha = .66$) in this sample than would have been obtained from the 3-item measure used in Study 1 ($\alpha = .58$).

Perceived social support. To examine whether general perceptions regarding what relationships may be utilized for social support mediates the association between relationship differentiation and well-being, participants indicated the likelihood that a person, in general, would turn to each of the three relationship types for 11 support needs, such as “emotional support,” “advice,” “to talk about their day,” and “financial support” that were inspired by the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List and other social support measures (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck, & Hoberman, 1985). This measure was designed to capture the relevant component of perceived social support regarding the availability of support (rather than a composite of availability and satisfaction). To the extent that an individual perceives only one relationship type as capable of providing a particular type of support, the lower they would score the other relationships and the lower they would score overall on this measure. Perceptions of support within each relationship type were averaged together (romantic $\alpha = .82$, friend $\alpha = .90$, family $\alpha = .93$) and then the three were standardized and averaged together into a composite measure of perceived social support ($\alpha = .68$; Appendix C).⁶

⁶ Given that relationship differentiation should affect perceived social support by affecting perceptions of support availability across relationships, we also calculated perceived social support in two other, untraditional, ways. To assess perceptions of support variability, we calculated the average standard deviation in social support scores for each participant, as well as an average difference score reflecting the average difference in expectations of support from the highest and second-highest scoring relationship for each support item. As expected, the standard deviation and average difference measures were both significantly and negatively correlated with our overall measure of perceived social support ($r = -.50, p < .001$ and $r = -.57, p < .001$, respectively) and using these measures produces results parallel to those presented. However, neither of these measures is preferable to the overall perceived social support measure as we predict that the association between relationship differentiation and well-being is due to

Well-being. To assess well-being, participants completed two measures of well-being at the conclusion of the survey. Participants completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale- Revised (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980; $\alpha = .91$). As in Study 1, responses were averaged together and then reverse-coded so that greater numbers would indicate lower levels of loneliness.

Furthermore, to capture well-being in regard to their relationships, participants were also asked to indicate the extent to which they were satisfied by their close friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships on seven-point Likert scales from “very unsatisfied” to “very satisfied” ($\alpha = .68$). These three items, and the reverse-coded loneliness scores were each standardized and then averaged together to create a composite measure of well-being ($\alpha = .74$).

Procedure. After consenting, participants completed the survey online. Participants responded to the measure of relationship similarity and overlap, followed by the measure of perceived social support provision. Finally, participants completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the relationship satisfaction items.

Results and Discussion

Conceptually replicating Study 1, relationship differentiation was significantly and negatively associated with well-being, $\beta = -.21$, $se = .072$, $t(138) = -2.86$, $p = .005$ (See Table 2 for first-order correlations). To test whether perceptions of perceived support provision mediated this relation, we tested the overall significance of the indirect effect by using Preacher & Hayes (2008) bootstrapping macro to construct bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. The confidence interval for the indirect effect [.040, .234] did not include zero, thus indicating significant mediation (Figure 2).

overall levels of perceived social support, which are known to influence well-being. In contrast, no research to our knowledge has examined or demonstrated a link between perceived support variability and well-being, although our current exploratory findings may suggest that such a link exists.

General Discussion

Taken together, the present research suggests that relationship differentiation is negatively associated with well-being. Across two studies, we found that perceptions of relationship differentiation were associated with poorer well-being in regards to loneliness, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction. We demonstrated that this link is not solely due to an individual's general cognitive tendency to structure their world in simple ways (Study 1) and instead, as predicted, is mediated by perceptions of social support provision (Study 2). Together, these studies demonstrate the implications of relationship differentiation for how individuals navigate among their relationships for social support.

Consistent with past research examining how self-schemas are structured (e.g., McConnell, 2011), the present research demonstrates that understanding relationship schematic structure provides another fruitful avenue for understanding well-being. This research is the first to examine how particular relationship types are perceived in relation to each other. By merging the extensive body of research on the content of relationship schemas (e.g., attachment models; Collins et al., 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012), with research on schematic structure, this approach may explain additional variance in relationship behaviors than the simple examination of individual relationship schemas in isolation. For example, the likelihood of romantic relationship dissolution is attributable, in part, to an individual's perception of possible alternative partners in their social network (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992), as well as the social norms present in their network about their present relationship (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). In this and other cases then, understanding how an individual perceives a relationship *in relation* to their other relationships may add explanatory power to our current understanding of various relational processes.

How an individual construes their social world and divides their social network may further our understanding of many social outcomes, such as loneliness. For example, because loneliness is subjective and often uncorrelated with an individual's actual social network size or level of social isolation (Cutrona, 1982; Peplau & Perlman, 1982), and only somewhat correlated with measures of received support (Haber et al., 2007), this feeling could be partially an indirect result of relationship differentiation, which may lead individuals to view their social networks as less replete with options for support (regardless of size) because the individual believes each need can be met by only one or two relationships. In contrast, individuals with low relationship differentiation may feel as if they have numerous options for any particular type of support they may seek, and thus feel less lonely and more supported. The present research has begun to address this question by demonstrating that perceived social support mediates the link between relationship differentiation and well-being. This mechanism should be examined further to ascertain whether it is the key factor in the link between relationship differentiation and well-being and whether interventions designed to decrease perceptions of relationship differentiation in regard to emotional support might alleviate feelings of loneliness.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present data, although correlational, are consistent with the idea that an individual's relationship differentiation may be linked to perceived social support, and that perceived social support may ultimately influence support-seeking behaviors and well-being. However, it is important for future research to ascertain the causality of this relation either through experimental or longitudinal studies. Experimental or longitudinal research would help control for other potential mechanisms that may explain the association between relationship

differentiation and well-being.⁷ For example, one could argue that this association is the result of another factor, such as social network size, affecting both relationship differentiation and well-being. Although our data cannot directly speak to this alternative explanation, controlling for participants' estimates of the amount of friends and family in their social network weakened, but did not fully eliminate the link between relationship differentiation and well-being in Study 2.⁸ Given that these numbers reflect participants' potentially biased perceptions of their social network and may somewhat reflect perceived social support, it is important for future research to examine the role of social network size in this process with more objective measures.

Another limitation of the present research is that the measures of relationship differentiation created for these studies obtained levels of reliability ($\alpha = .66$) that did not reach traditional levels of strength. This suggests that there may be considerable variability in how similar any two pairs of close relationships are perceived to be and future research would benefit from more context-specific measures. Furthermore, due to the low reliability of the relationship differentiation measure, the association found between relationship differentiation and well-being may be attenuated and stronger than that reported in the present studies. One potential avenue for obtaining more reliable measures would involve the creation of narrower conceptualizations of relationship differentiation. For example, if an individual views friends as substitutable for romantic partners, measuring differentiation between friendships and romantic relationships would yield a more reliable measurement that would be more proximal to potential outcomes of interest (such as well-being after a break-up) than measuring differentiation between

⁷ Although experimental studies would eliminate potential confounds and alternative explanations, a longitudinal study might be preferred in this context, as the association between relationship differentiation and well-being may be a long-term process that would not be captured through the use of a temporary manipulation of relationship differentiation.

⁸ The association between relationship differentiation and well-being remained significant even when controlling for participants' estimates of the amount of friends and family in their social network, $\beta = -.12$, $se = .06$, $t(132) = -1.95$, $p = .054$. Participants' estimate of friends and family also significantly predicted well-being, $\beta = .62$, $se = .09$, $t(132) = 7.02$, $p = .000$.

the three types of relationships assessed in the present research. Similarly, one could limit the scope of relationship differentiation measures to include the perceived differentiation of specific relationship characteristics, such as “emotionally supportive,” that are relevant to the particular outcomes of interest. A measure of emotional support differentiation, for example, should be better able to predict differences in coping with a traumatic or tragic life event than a measure that also captures differentiation in perceptions of other types of support (e.g. financial support).

Thus, although the purpose of the present research was to demonstrate the existence and impact of relationship differentiation *in general*, future research would benefit from less general and more proximal measures. For example, a measure that captures the extent to which romantic relationships are viewed as distinct from close friendships may aid in predicting who will date among their friend group, remain friends with ex-romantic partners, and who may remain in a romantic relationship until there is a replacement romantic partner available to fill that distinct category. Thus, the various ways in which we differentiate between our relationships can serve as unique and useful predictors of many relationship behaviors and outcomes.

Finally, the present research is limited in that it utilized only self-reports taken over a single study session. Consequently, the present correlations are biased by shared-method variance between the self-report of relationship differentiation and self-reported well-being, potentially inflating the current estimates found in these studies. Similarly, because these measures were obtained within a single study session, it is possible that there was an order effect (e.g., an unintended manipulation of mood upon asking questions about one’s relationship beliefs) that could have artificially inflated the correlations between relationship differentiation and well-being. Given that our present research cannot speak to these possibilities, future research should obtain more objective indicators of well-being such as clinical measures or peer

reports, as well as collect self-reports across multiple study sessions in order to produce more precise estimates of the association between relationship differentiation and well-being.

Conclusion

Research on the content of relationship schemas has advanced our knowledge of relationship processes, and extending this research to the structure or organization of the schemas is the next step toward a fuller understanding of social behavior. Individuals' behaviors within relationships are a product of both their feelings toward that relationship and how they view it in the context of the rest of their social network. Consequently, examining relative beliefs about relationships may yield numerous novel insights into how individuals make relationship decisions and view their social world. By merging research on the content and structure of relationship schemas, we may understand just how individuals can have such different perceptions of their objectively similar social networks.

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Table 1*First-order Correlations in Study 1*

	Relationship Differentiation	Need for Simple Structure	Well-being
Relationship Differentiation	(.66)		
Need for Simple Structure	.069	(.80)	
Well-being	-.141*	-.172*	(.79)

Note: * $p < .05$. Cronbach's alpha scores for each scale are reported in parenthesis on the diagonal. Well-being measure is the standardized composite of relationship satisfaction items and loneliness. $N = 195-198$

Table 2*First-order Correlations in Study 2*

Variables	1	2	3	4
Relationship Differentiation	(.66)			
Perceived Social Support	-.449**	(.68)		
Well-being	-.278**	.381**	(.74)	
Amount friends and family	-.188*	.255**	.568**	n.a.

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. Cronbach's alpha scores for each scale are reported in parenthesis on the diagonal, where applicable. Well-being measure is the standardized composite of relationship satisfaction and loneliness. $N = 140$

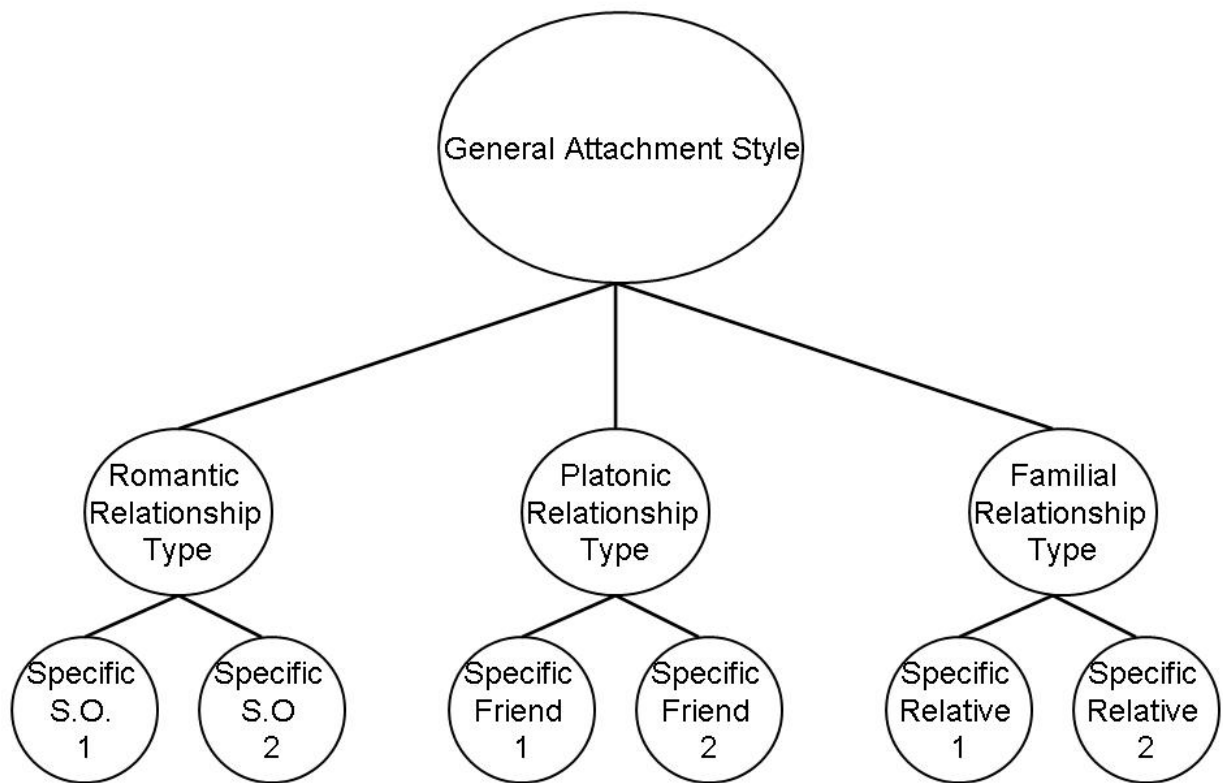
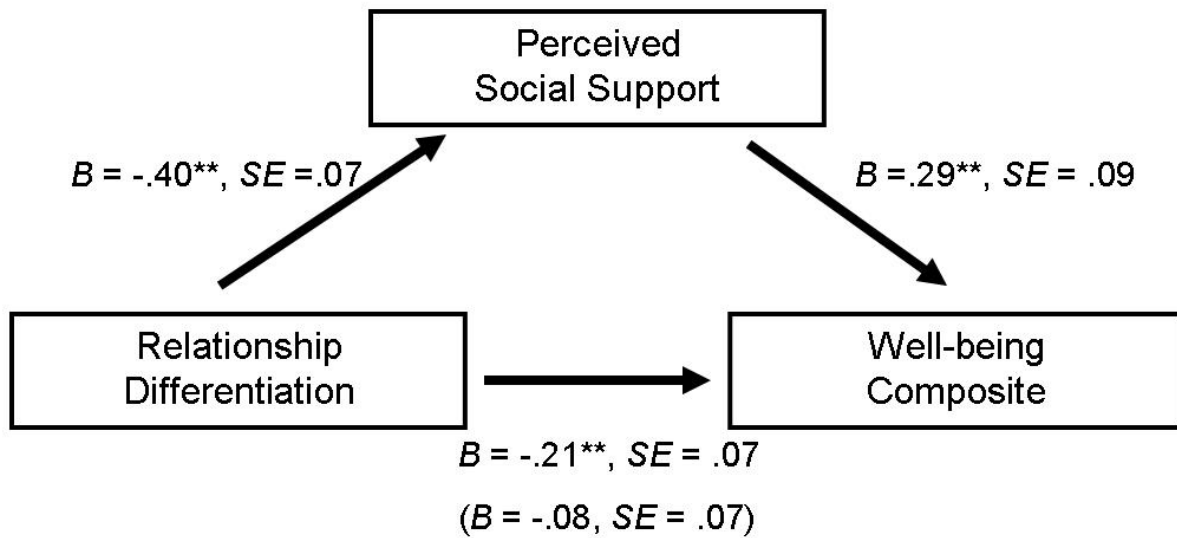


Figure 1. Best-fitting model to explain attachment anxiety and avoidance variability. Adapted from Overall et al., 2003



95% Confidence Interval: [.04, .23]

Figure 2. Association between relationship similarity and well-being as mediated by perceived social support availability. Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown. Statistical significance is indicated by superscripts (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$). The 95% confidence interval from a bootstrap test performed to assess the indirect effect is reported in the square brackets; the mediated effect is significant if the confidence interval does not include zero.

Appendix A

Relationship Differentiation Measure- Study 1

Instructions: For the following questions, please indicate to what extent the relationship types are SIMILAR to each other by indicating your agreement with the statements.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree Strongly	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Agree Strongly

1. Romantic relationships are similar to family relationships.
2. Romantic relationships are similar to friendships.
3. Friendships are similar to family relationships.

Appendix B

Relationship Differentiation Measure- Study 2

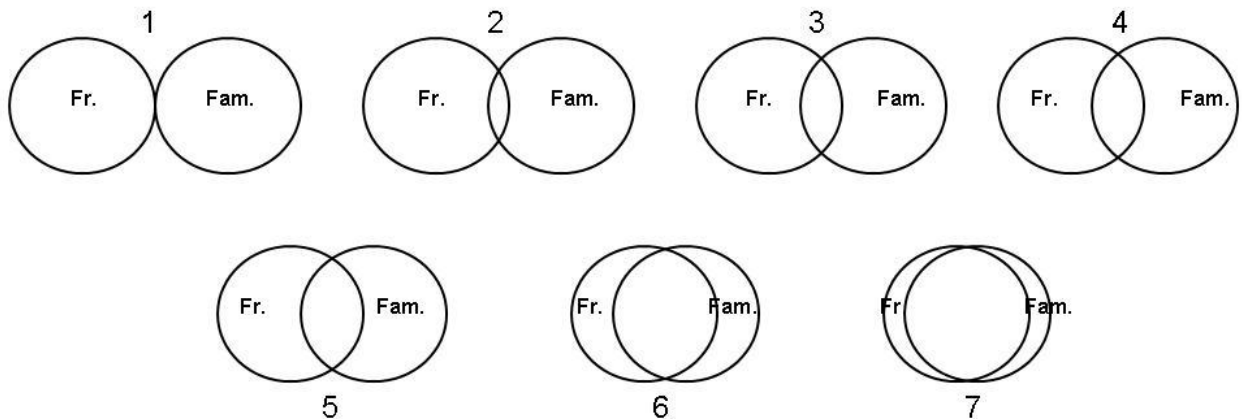
Instructions: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree Strongly	Disagree	Disagree Slightly	Agree Slightly	Agree	Agree Strongly

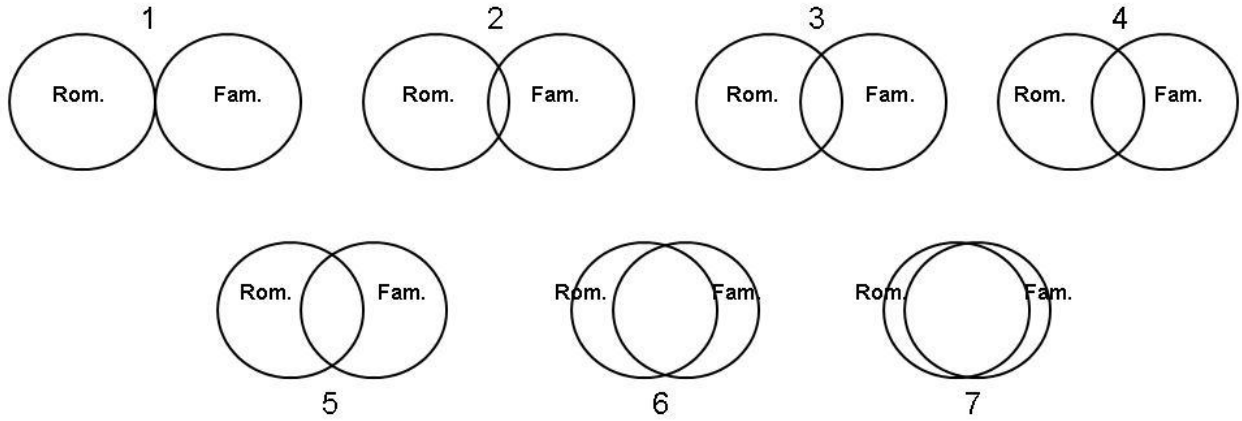
1. In general, romantic relationships are similar to family relationships.
2. In general, romantic relationships are similar to friendships.
3. In general, friendships are similar to family relationships.

Comparing Relationships:

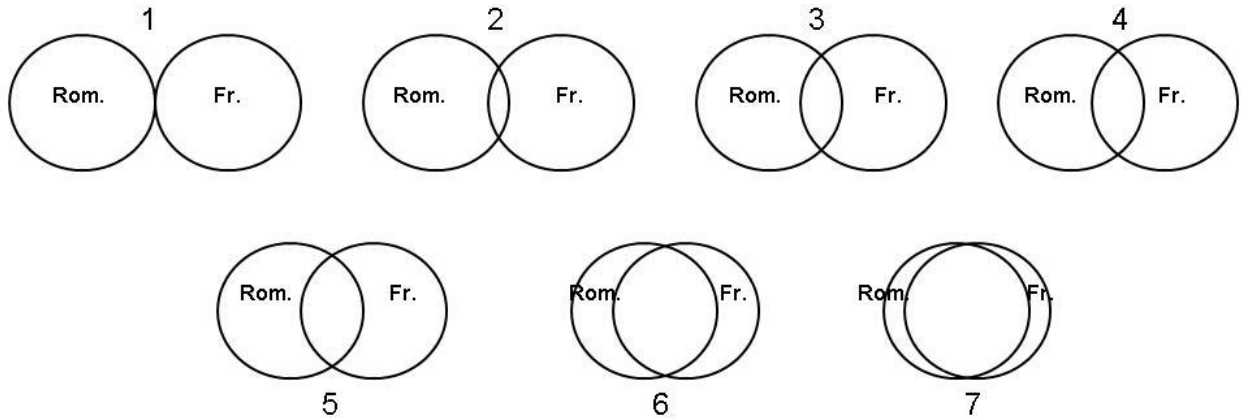
Instructions: Select the number that corresponds to the circles that you think best describe how similar friendships and family relationships are in general.



Instructions: Select the number that corresponds to the circles that you think best describe how similar romantic relationships and family relationships are in general.



Instructions: Select the number that corresponds to the circles that you think best describe how similar friendships and romantic relationships are in general.



Appendix C

Perceived Social Support

Instructions: In general, how likely is it that someone can turn to their [ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS] [CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS] [CLOSE FAMILY] when they need...

- | | Not at all likely | Slightly likely | Somewhat likely | Moderately likely | Very likely |
|--|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 1... emotional support | | | | | |
| 2... financial support | | | | | |
| 3... advice | | | | | |
| 4... someone to listen | | | | | |
| 5... sympathy | | | | | |
| 6... to vent frustration | | | | | |
| 7... a shoulder to cry on | | | | | |
| 8... to talk about schoolwork | | | | | |
| 9... to talk about relationship problems | | | | | |
| 10... to talk about their day | | | | | |
| 11... company | | | | | |