

Social Support and Social Strain Among Husbands and Wives: A Multilevel Analysis

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In response to recent calls in the literature for within-person examinations of social support processes over time, this study explores the relationships of spousal support, spousal strain, and well-being among husbands and wives, both within the same day and across days. Eighty-three couples were interviewed and completed a structured diary twice daily for 1 week. The results of multilevel hierarchical modeling suggest that both spousal support and spousal strain made significant, independent contributions to concurrent negative affect, although only spousal support was a significant predictor of next-day negative affect. Spousal strain interacted with spousal support to predict next-day negative affect. Direct and moderating effects of perceived marital adjustment on negative affect were discussed.

keywords: social support, stress, marital satisfaction, stepfamilies, social strain, daily process method

Perceptions of support have been found to be associated with a variety of indices of well-being. However, research in this area has tended to take a nomothetic, or between-persons, approach. That is, studies have addressed whether those persons who generally have higher levels of social support also have higher levels of well-being. This has led to recent calls for the use of daily process methodologies that allow an examination of within-person, idiographic processes across time (Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000). The use of a time-intensive design serves to minimize recall error and allows a close examination of the temporal patterning of stress, coping, and support processes. The present study involved a daily process methodology to examine the importance of both daily spousal support and spousal strain for the day-to-day emotional functioning of husbands and wives. The relations among daily measures of support, strain, and well-being were examined within the

context of co-occurring support and strain in the same day as well as overall perceived marital quality.

Support and Well-Being

Although few studies of support have used a daily process methodology, both Cutrona (1986) and Peeters, Buunk, and Schaufeli (1995) incorporated these techniques and found that on days on which participants reported receiving more support, they were less likely to experience concurrent psychological distress. Feldman, Downey, and Schaffer-Neitz (1999) examined the lagged impact of daily support across days on mood and found that greater social support predicted lower negative mood on the next day. Although studies examining the negative aspects of day-to-day social support have been scant, the literature suggests that negative social interactions have stronger associations with psychological distress than do positive aspects of social support. For example, Major, Zubek, Cooper, Cozzarelli, and Richards (1997) found that conflict with the spouse, but not support, was related to subsequent distress.

Synergistic Influence of Social Support and Social Strain

Investigators have called for a consideration not only of direct effects of positive and negative social transactions but also of the ways in which they may interact (e.g., Schuster, Kessler, & Aseltine, 1990). The evidence for an interaction between positive and negative dimensions of support has been mixed, with three patterns emerging in the literature. First, highly supportive social networks appear to moderate the immediate detrimental impact of problematic interactions, just as they have been shown to buffer other types of

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stressors (Revenson, Schiaffino, Majerovitz, & Gibofsky, 1991). Second, conflict in one's social network can attenuate the positive impact of social networks (Okun & Keith, 1998). Third, the impact of upsetting interactions can be heightened in networks that are usually characterized by supportive exchanges (Pagel, Erdly, & Becker, 1987).

When considering the social network as a whole, however, one is unable to ascertain whether a significant statistical interaction is due to positive and negative social exchanges occurring within a single relationship or across several interpersonal relationships. Researchers such as Major et al. (1997) have identified the need for nonaggregated analyses. They argue that the relationship between support and strain may look very different when assessed at a specific versus a general level.

There are some indications that social support within a relationship can attenuate the negative impact of relationship strain on concurrent distress. For example, Okun and Keith (1998) found that for at least some couples, support from the spouse moderated the impact of negative spousal exchanges. However, Schuster et al. (1990), for example, did not find a significant interaction between supportive and negative exchanges with spouses in the prediction of psychological adjustment.

The Role of Dyadic Adjustment in the Spousal Support and Spousal Strain Processes

The interpersonal context within which supportive or problematic social interactions occur can be an important determinant of the impact of support or strain (Cutrona, 1996). In fact, the success of social support efforts, as well as the impact of social strain, has been found to depend on the particular type of relationship between the provider and recipient, such as between spouses, parent and child, or employer and employee (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). In a related line of reasoning, it is possible that the nature of a specific relationship, such as the quality of the marital relationship, could moderate the impact of spousal support and spousal strain.

Marital Relationship

Marriage is an important context in which to examine social support. People often rely on their spouse for support during stressful events. In addition, spouses can be seen to provide all types of support and to play a critical role in the provision of emotional support. Support from one's intimate partner is uniquely beneficial. In fact, support from other sources does not entirely compensate for what is lacking in a spousal relationship (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986). The spouse is not only the greatest source of satisfaction but also the greatest source of conflict (Argyle & Furnham, 1983).

Dyadic Adjustment as a Moderator of Spousal Support or Spousal Strain

When supportive and negative spousal interactions occur close together in time, they can influence the impact of each

other. In other words, each can be thought of as providing a proximal interpersonal context for the other. Similarly, the perceived overall quality of a marriage can be considered a more distal interpersonal context for supportive and negative spousal exchanges. Schuster et al. (1990) suggested that negative social interactions might be perceived as less serious when they occur in the context of a very supportive relationship. A better quality relationship might buffer the deleterious impact on well-being of negative spousal behaviors. When a partner behaves in an unpleasant or inconsiderate way, his or her spouse's attribution for the behavior will likely be more benign if the relationship is characterized by trust and goodwill (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). Consequently, the impact of a lack of support or the presence of strain may be less detrimental in the context of a generally well-functioning relationship.

In contrast, others have postulated that negative events might be particularly salient in relationships usually characterized by harmonious interactions and, therefore, that these negative events may have the capacity to cause strong emotions because they are unexpected (Rook & Pietromonaco, 1987). Similarly, Cutrona (1996) proposed that support might be thought of as particularly positive when it comes from someone who is usually more negative.

Current Study

The primary aim of the current study was to examine daily spousal support, spousal strain, and well-being in husbands and wives. Despite an accumulating literature regarding social support, little is known about the day-to-day impact on well-being of support and strain within intimate relationships such as marriage. Further, these issues have rarely been examined within a process-oriented model. The current study used multilevel modeling, which allowed for the simultaneous examination of both between-person differences and within-person differences in daily spousal support and spousal strain, thus allowing integration of these sources of influence on daily well-being in the same model. Moreover, the relationship between spousal support and spousal strain was examined as it unfolded over time, allowing for the examination of both immediate and lagged effects on negative affect. It was expected that daily spousal support and daily spousal strain would have independent contributions to concurrent negative affect, with daily spousal support being negatively related to negative affect, and spousal strain being positively related to negative affect. In addition, daily spousal support was expected to have independent contributions across days to negative affect, with spousal support being negatively related to negative affect the next morning. Daily fluctuations in social support have been found to have lagged effects across days on mood (Feldman et al., 1999). On the other hand, spousal strain was not expected to be a significant predictor of next-day psychological distress given previous research indicating that social strain does not have an impact on mood across days (Stader & Hokanson, 1998).

In addition, we anticipated an interaction between spousal support and spousal strain in predicting negative affect,

independent of their direct effects. That is, the impact, for example, of affection from the spouse is likely to be quite different on a day when a spouse has been generally negative and hostile than on a day during which a spouse has been generally loving. Further, overall marital quality was expected to be predictive of lower negative affect and to attenuate the negative impact of low spousal support and high spousal strain on negative affect. That is, those couples in good-quality marriages were expected to show greater resilience in dealing with the natural ups and downs of married life. If, for example, after a bad day at work a wife is critical of her husband, the impact of this criticism is expected to be significantly lower for those husbands who report being in a generally good marriage as compared with those in a poor marriage.

Method

Information was drawn from data collected as part of a larger prospective study investigating stress, coping, and support within stepfamilies. The design included two interviews conducted approximately 2 years apart as well as structured daily diaries and a battery of questionnaires completed after the first interview.

Sample

Couples were recruited from the Lower Mainland of British Columbia by means of newspaper and radio advertisements (71%) and posters on community bulletin boards (29%). The sample was limited to those families having at least one child from a previous union (of either spouse) living in the home for more than 3 months of the year. Further, only couples that were married or had been living together for at least 2 years were included. Finally, because of difficulties in advertising and interviewing in more than one language, couples were limited to those who were fluent in English. Participating in the initial interview were 154 couples. Of these, 83 couples (54%) returned completed diaries and questionnaire packets, and only these couples were included in the present study.

Couples who completed the diary study were compared with those who did not complete the diary study on a variety of demographic and other variables, including education, income, years in the stepfamily, number of children from the current union, average age of children in the stepfamily, and relationship quality. The only significant difference between couples who completed diaries and those who did not was the average age of the children. In stepfamilies in which couples completed diary data, the children were older, on average, than in stepfamilies in which couples did not complete the diary study ($M_s = 12.02$ and 9.79 , respectively), $t(153) = 2.94$, $p < .01$.

Mean age was 40 years, ranging from 20 to 59 years. The majority of participants were Canadian-born (72%), with the remainder largely from other English-speaking countries (i.e., the United States and England). The mean level of education was 13 years, ranging from 5 to 17 years. Participants were predominantly middle to upper-middle class, and the majority were employed (80%). At the time of the interview, couples had spent an average of 4.6 years living together, with a range from less than a year to 12 years. The majority of the husbands and wives in our sample had been married at least once previously. Eighty-eight percent of the sample had children from a previous union. The mean number of children in the stepfamily was 3.1, with a range of 1 to 8

children. The children spent, on average, 7.8 months of the year in the stepfamily home under study.

Procedure

During the first phase of the study, trained undergraduate research assistants conducted telephone interviews. Each spouse was assigned to a different interviewer, and each interviewer was blind to any information received from the other spouse. Following the first interview, couples were mailed a packet of self-report measures, as well as a set of structured diaries to be completed twice per day over a period of one week. Each spouse was asked to complete the diary entries "around lunch time or mid-afternoon" and "just before going to sleep at night" and to record the time of each of his or her diary entries. In the instructions accompanying the materials, the importance of each spouse completing these materials independently was emphasized. Each spouse was provided a number of adhesive tabs with which to seal each diary entry after completion. These measures were intended to increase confidentiality.

Interview Measures

Demographics. Demographics were assessed during the interview. Age, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES) were assessed as necessary control variables for the study. SES was operationalized as the estimated total family income as well as years of formal education.

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). The DAS (Spanier, 1976) was included in the interview as a measure of marital satisfaction. Slight modifications were necessary to make it more appropriate for administration during a telephone interview. The modifications included minor rewording of several questions and a change in the scale options from a 6-point Likert scale to a 5-point scale (*never disagree to always disagree*). This alteration was made so that the DAS response scale would be consistent with the rest of the interview. Three items were also dropped to avoid confusion due to inconsistencies in scale format. These included two out of the three items concerning recreation and leisure and an item regarding the future of the relationship. Cronbach's alpha for the scale showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$).

Diary Measures

Mood. Negative affect was assessed in the morning and evening by a short form of the Negative Affect scale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Each spouse was asked to report around lunch time or mid-afternoon ("Circle the number that best describes how much you experienced the following emotions so far today") and just before going to sleep at night ("Circle the number that best describes how much you experienced the following emotions since your last diary entry") for the following adjectives: guilty, nervous, upset, irritable, and afraid. These descriptors include one term for each of the five content categories of the Negative Affect scale of the PANAS. A 3-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a lot*). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the scale showed adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .73$). The mean autocorrelation for negative affect was .34 for a.m. negative affect and .36 for p.m. negative affect for a one-day lag.

Daily spousal support and daily spousal strain. As a general measure of daily perceived spousal support, participants were asked each evening, "Considering the whole day, to what extent did your spouse show affection or support towards you?" In

addition, as a general measure of daily spousal strain, the participants were asked each evening, "Considering the whole day, to what extent did your spouse disappoint or criticize you?" For both items, a 3-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a lot*). The mean autocorrelation was .41 for spousal support and .23 for spousal strain for a one-day lag.

Daily hassles. The diary included a checklist of problems in daily living. Because of the potential overlap with social strain, interpersonal tensions, including tension with spouse, were excluded from the checklist. This list was based on a checklist of daily events that has been used in previous research (Bolger et al., 1989; DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988). Participants were asked each evening to indicate the stresses that they had recently experienced: "Check any of the problems listed below that you have had since your last diary entry." The mean autocorrelation was .42 for daily hassles for a one-day lag.

Results

Univariate and Bivariate Analyses

First, we calculated means and standard deviations for both Level 1 (time-variant) and Level 2 (time-invariant) study variables. Level 1 variables were aggregated for each spouse over all time points. Participants reported a mean social support score of 2.56 ($SD = 0.38$) and a mean social strain score of 1.38 ($SD = 0.33$). Participants reported an average of 0.59 ($SD = 0.55$) hassles per day. Average evening and next-morning measures of negative affect were 1.25 ($SD = 0.21$) and 1.22 ($SD = 0.21$), respectively. The mean item score for dyadic adjustment, a time-invariant variable, was 4.15 ($SD = 0.47$).

Correlations among the daily variables (aggregated for each participant across all time points), gender, and dyadic adjustment indicated that dyadic adjustment and spousal strain were significantly negatively related, $r(166) = -.36$, $p < .01$. Dyadic adjustment and social support were significantly positively related, $r(166) = .39$, $p < .01$. Spousal support was significantly negatively associated with evening and next morning affect, $r(166) = -.22$, $p < .01$, and $r(166) = -.26$, $p < .01$, respectively. Spousal strain was significantly positively related to negative affect in the evening, $r(166) = .40$, $p < .01$, and the next morning, $r(166) = .29$, $p < .01$, respectively. In addition, gender was associated with a.m. and p.m. negative affect, $r(166) = .19$, $p < .05$, with wives evidencing significantly higher negative affect at both times.

Three-Level Hierarchical Linear Models

Level 1 Modeling (Intra-Individual Variable)

Repeated measures from the diary were nested within persons, which in turn were nested within couples. At the first level, we examined daily relationships among the variables. These analyses explored individual variability in the effects of the predictor variables on negative affect, looking separately at the association with p.m. negative affect as well as with next-day a.m. negative affect.¹ Before specifying models testing the research questions, we added demographic variables (gender, age, years of education, and

family income) individually to the null model (model predicting daily negative affect with no explanatory variables). Only gender was significantly related to daily negative affect. Consistent with recommended multilevel model specification, we dropped the nonsignificant effects, and only gender was retained in subsequent analyses (Snijders & Bosker, 1999).

Do daily spousal support and spousal strain have independent contributions to concurrent (same-day) and lagged (next-day) negative affect? Do spousal support and spousal strain interact to predict well-being? Initially, we specified a model predicting same-day p.m. negative affect that included spousal support and spousal strain for that day as well as the interaction between them, controlling for gender, a.m. mood, and daily hassles.² We included the interaction term to test for a synergistic effect between spousal support and spousal strain in the prediction of negative affect. The analysis revealed that the interaction between spousal support and spousal strain was not significantly related to same-day p.m. negative affect, $\beta = -0.03$, $t(972) = -1.63$, $p > .10$.

As the interaction between spousal support and spousal strain was not significant, we refitted the model without this effect (see Table 1). Findings indicated that both spousal support and spousal strain were independently associated with p.m. negative affect, with spousal support negatively related and spousal strain positively related, $\beta = -0.08$, $t(973) = -2.98$, $p < .01$, and $\beta = 0.21$, $t(973) = 7.60$, $p < .01$, respectively. In addition, although both spousal support and spousal strain contributed significantly to p.m. negative affect, the absolute magnitude of the beta for spousal strain was greater than that for spousal support, $\chi^2(1, N = 166) = 7.43$, $p < .01$.

Next we specified a model predicting next-day a.m. negative affect that included previous-day spousal support and

¹ The current study follows suggestions of Snijders and Bosker (1999) regarding the specification and interpretation of within-level or cross-level interactions: (a) If a model includes an interaction effect, then the corresponding main effects are included even if the main effects are nonsignificant; (b) both variables in an interaction term should have a meaningful zero value; and (c) in the presence of an interaction term (XZ), the coefficients of a main effect (X) are to be interpreted as the effect of X for cases with $Z = 0$, while the main effect coefficient of Z is to be interpreted as the effect for Z for cases $X = 0$. As the variables in the current study are standardized, in the presence of an interaction a coefficient for a main effect for either variable specified in an interaction is interpreted as the effect on well-being under average levels of the other variable specified in the interaction.

² All HLM models presented were also previously specified with gender modeled separately on spousal support and spousal strain. No cross-level interactions were found to be significant, for either same-day or next-day models. Thus, gender was not a significant moderator of the relationship of spousal support or spousal strain with negative affect. Further, daily hassles were included as a control variable. All HLM models presented were also previously specified with interactions between daily hassles and daily support and strain, where they were not found to be significant.

Table 1
Hierarchical Linear Model Analyses: Relations of Daily Measures of Spousal Support, Spousal Strain, and Hassles to Same-Day p.m. Negative Affect and Next-Day a.m. Negative Affect

Effect ^a	Same-day p.m. negative affect		Next-day a.m. negative affect	
	β	SE	β	SE
Gender	-.05*	.03	-.08**	.03
a.m. negative affect	.25**	.03	.22**	.03
Spousal support	-.08**	.03	-.09**	.04
Spousal strain	.21**	.03	-.01	.03
Hassles	.26**	.03	.04	.03
Spousal Support \times Spousal Strain			.07**	.03

^a All variables, except gender, have been standardized.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

spousal strain, controlling for gender, hassles, and previous-day a.m. negative affect. As in the model predicting same-day p.m. negative affect, we first included an interaction term between spousal support and spousal strain. As this term was significant, we retained the interaction term in the model. Previous-day spousal support, but not spousal strain, was significantly related to subsequent a.m. negative affect, $\beta = -0.09$, $t(815) = -2.56$, $p < .01$, and $\beta = -0.005$, $t(815) = -0.14$, $p > .36$, respectively (see Table 1).³ In addition, the magnitude of the effect on next-day a.m. negative affect for spousal support was greater than that for spousal strain, $\chi^2(1) = 3.98$, $p < .05$. The interaction term between spousal support and spousal strain was a significant predictor of next-day a.m. negative affect, $\beta = 0.07$, $t(815) = 2.80$, $p < .01$. This result suggested that spousal support and spousal strain provided an important context for each other. The relationship of spousal support and spousal strain to next-day a.m. negative affect was analyzed with values for each variable corresponding to the mean minus one standard deviation (low) and the mean plus one standard deviation (high). As can be seen in Figure 1, the presence of spousal strain moderated the relationship of spousal support to negative affect the next morning such that the association between spousal support and negative affect was attenuated. Spousal support was related to negative affect on the next morning primarily under conditions of low spousal strain.

Level 2 Modeling (Inter-Individual Variable)

Do dyadic adjustment and daily spousal support and spousal strain have independent contributions to same-day p.m. negative affect or next-day a.m. negative affect? Does marital adjustment moderate the relations between spousal support and spousal strain on same-day and next-day negative affect? In order to test whether dyadic adjustment moderated the relations between daily spousal support and spousal strain to same-day p.m. negative affect, we tested cross-level interactions separately (see Table 2; Models 1

and 2).⁴ Dyadic adjustment significantly moderated the relationships between both spousal support and spousal strain on same-day p.m. negative affect, $\beta = 0.05$, $t(971) = 2.03$, $p < .05$, and $\beta = -0.05$, $t(971) = -2.06$, $p < .05$, respectively. Dyadic adjustment was not found to have a main effect on negative affect in either model, $\beta = -.05$, $t(971) = -1.40$, $p > .10$, and $\beta = -0.06$, $t(971) = -1.48$, $p > .10$, respectively.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the overall quality of the marriage influenced the relationship between spousal support and negative affect such that the association between low spousal support and negative affect was attenuated in spouses who perceived their marriages to be well adjusted. Thus, low spousal support was related to negative affect primarily in spouses who perceived their marriages to be less well adjusted. Under conditions of high daily spousal support, negative affect was relatively low regardless of perceived level of dyadic adjustment. As can be seen in Figure 3, overall quality of the relationship also influenced the relationship between spousal strain and p.m. negative affect. In particular, the pattern suggested that the association of high spousal strain and negative affect was reduced in spouses who perceived their marriages to be well adjusted.

Next, we specified a model to test whether dyadic adjustment moderated the relationships between previous-day spousal support and spousal strain with next-day a.m. negative affect. Contrary to expectations, the cross-level interactions of dyadic adjustment with spousal support and spousal strain were not found to be significant predictors of next-day a.m. negative affect, $\beta = -0.006$, $t(813) = -.02$, $p > .10$, and $\beta = 0.03$, $t(813) = 0.87$, $p > .10$, respectively.⁵ We then respecified the model without the cross-level interaction terms to provide the estimates of the main effects (see Table 2). As predicted, these analyses revealed a main effect for dyadic adjustment on next-day a.m. negative affect, $\beta = -0.11$, $t(814) = -2.36$, $p < .05$. Spousal support and the interaction between spousal support and spousal strain were significantly related to next-day a.m. negative affect, $\beta = -.08$, $t(814) = -2.31$, $p < .05$, and $\beta = 0.07$, $t(814) = 2.68$, $p < .01$, respectively. Spousal strain during the previous day did not predict the next day's a.m. negative affect, $\beta = -0.01$, $t(814) = -0.30$, $p > .10$.

Discussion

Spousal Support and Spousal Strain

Same-Day Negative Affect

As predicted, daily spousal support and spousal strain had independent associations with negative affect on the same

³ When the model was run without spousal support, spousal strain remained a nonsignificant predictor of next-day a.m. negative affect.

⁴ These were modeled separately because of concerns regarding multicollinearity.

⁵ The same pattern of results was found when the interaction of spousal support by spousal strain was dropped from the models.

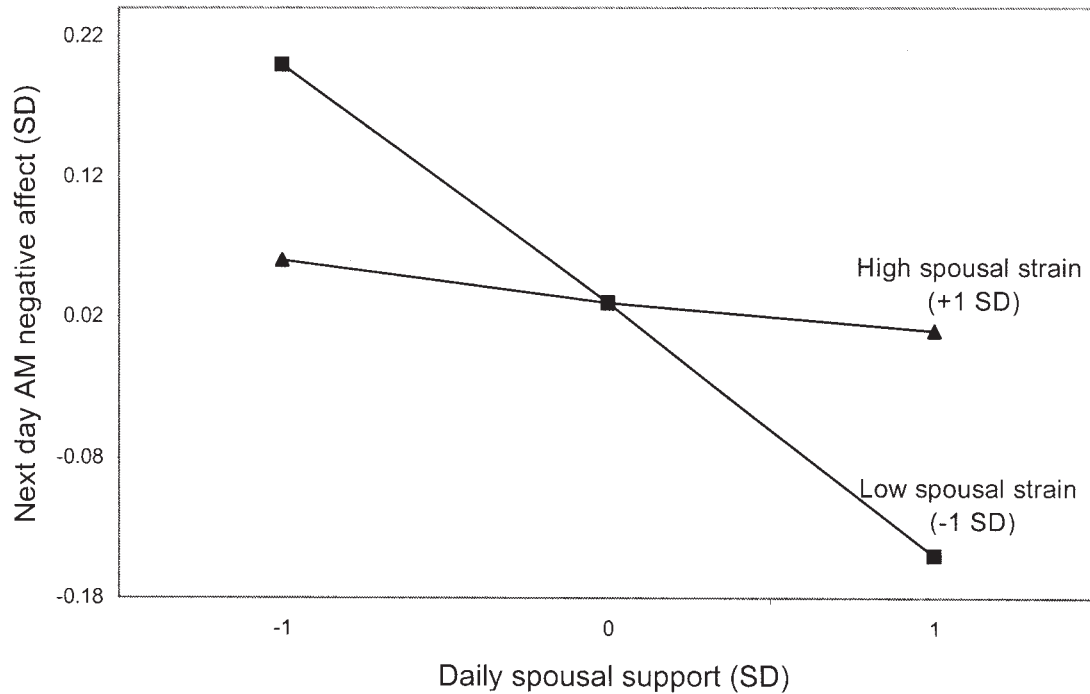


Figure 1. The relationship between daily spousal support and spousal strain to next-day a.m. negative affect.

day. Spousal support was associated with negative affect across the same day, whereas daily spousal strain was related to negative affect. The finding that spousal strain had a significantly stronger association with concurrent negative affect than did spousal support is consistent with the ma-

jority of cross-sectional studies that have compared social support and social strain (Okun & Keith, 1998).

Overall, there is substantial evidence that negative events produce more immediate intense reactions and result in a stronger effect on concurrent psychological distress than do positive events (Taylor, 1991). The findings of the current study, in which spousal strain had a stronger relationship with concurrent negative affect than did spousal support, are consistent with this more general research on positive and negative events. Several hypotheses have been put forth to explain this phenomenon. For instance, it has been proposed that negative events have a potent impact on well-being because they tend to occur less frequently than do positive events and therefore should be more salient (Fiske, 1980). Although we found that spousal support was indeed more prevalent than was spousal strain, findings from the present study do not support the argument that the more potent impact of negative interactions is due to increased saliency. If this had been so, one would expect the association of spousal strain and well-being to be strongest among those whose relationships were characterized by better adjustment, yet the opposite was found. That is, the effect of spousal strain on well-being was strongest among those who had the worst marriages.

Alternatively, human beings may have an innate predisposition to be more vigilant regarding negative experiences because they represent potential threats to well-being (Rook & Pietromonaco, 1987). Suls (1982) has argued that the differential impact of positive and negative social events on

Table 2

Hierarchical Linear Model Analyses: Relations of Dyadic Adjustment and Daily Measures of Spousal Support, Spousal Strain, Hassles, and a.m. Negative Affect to Same-Day p.m. Negative Affect and Next-Day a.m. Negative Affect

Effect ^a	Same-day p.m. negative affect				Next-day a.m. negative affect	
	Model 1		Model 2		β	SE
	β	SE	β	SE		
Gender	-.06*	.03	-.06*	.03	-.08**	.03
Dyadic adjustment	-.05	.04	-.06	.04	-.11*	.05
a.m. negative affect	.24**	.03	.24**	.03	.21**	.03
Spousal support	-.07*	.03	-.07**	.03	-.08*	.04
Spousal strain	.20**	.03	.19**	.03	-.01	.04
Hassles	.27**	.03	.26**	.03	.04	.03
Spousal Support \times Spousal Strain					.07**	.03
Dyadic Adjustment \times Spousal Support	.05*	.02				
Dyadic Adjustment \times Spousal Strain			-.05*	.02		

^a All variables, except gender, have been standardized.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

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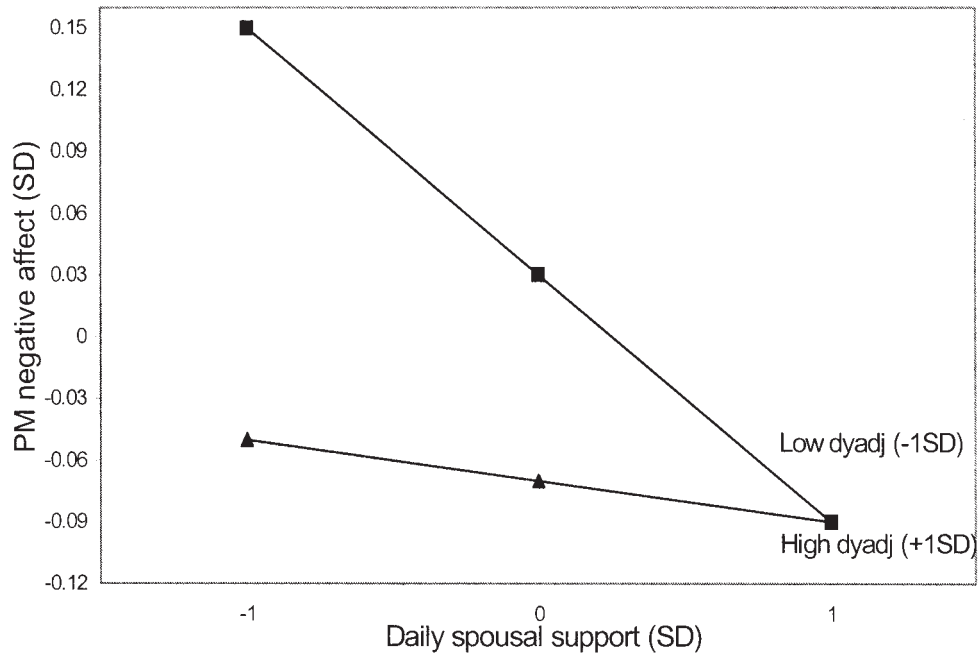


Figure 2. The role of dyadic adjustment (dyadj) in the relationship between daily spousal support and p.m. negative affect

immediate mood might be due to attributional ambiguities associated with positive social exchanges. That is to say people may be quick to infer malicious intent to the negative actions of others but less rapid in inferring good intentions for positive actions because they are normative.

Next-Day Negative Affect

Consistent with previous research (Bolger et al., 1989), spousal support, but not spousal strain, was a significant predictor of negative affect across days. Taylor (1991) suggested that negative events might have a larger yet more time-limited impact on well-being than do positive events. She hypothesized that the rapid, strong emotional reactions brought about by negative events could instigate counter processing. Thus, the negative emotional reaction might dissipate rapidly over time. Similarly, Thoits (1995) described individuals not as passive reactors to external events, but as active psychological agents, who will be motivated to counter strong negative psychological states. Adverse emotional conditions have been found to elicit mood regulation strategies aimed at repairing or extinguishing adverse mood states (Forgas, Johnson, & Ciarrochi, 1998). In contrast to the processes invoked by negative events, Taylor (1991) proposed that the milder reactions of positive events would not necessarily trigger compensatory reactions so that their impact, although smaller, might linger longer than negative events. Certainly, this is consistent with the patterns among social strain, social support, and negative affect found in our study.

Contextual Influences on Support and Strain Processes

Proximal Interpersonal Context

Although spousal support and spousal strain did not interact to predict current-day mood in the present study, they did interact to predict next-day negative affect. This synergistic effect suggests that when daily supportive and negative spousal interactions co-occur, the presence of conflict interferes with the positive impact of spousal support on mood as time unfolds. Episodes of conflict in a relationship may change the interpersonal context in which subsequent social support is received, so that helping transactions may be less likely to be perceived as genuine and nonthreatening. For example, Holmes and Murray (1996) described a "contamination process," in which conflict creates shifts in the interpretation of subsequent behavior, so that partners' behavior will be construed in the context of the individual's increasingly suspicious framing of the situation. The impact of positive behavior may therefore be attenuated if an individual is primed to be distrustful of the intent of the spouse's apparent supportive behavior.

Nevertheless, this explanation does not account for our finding that conflict interfered only with the prediction of negative affect across days, but not on the same day. Perhaps a background of conflict does not interfere with the initial decrease in negative affect that results from support but attenuates the ability to maintain this effect. Another possibility is that the attributional shift to the cautious style described above is not an immediate process but one that

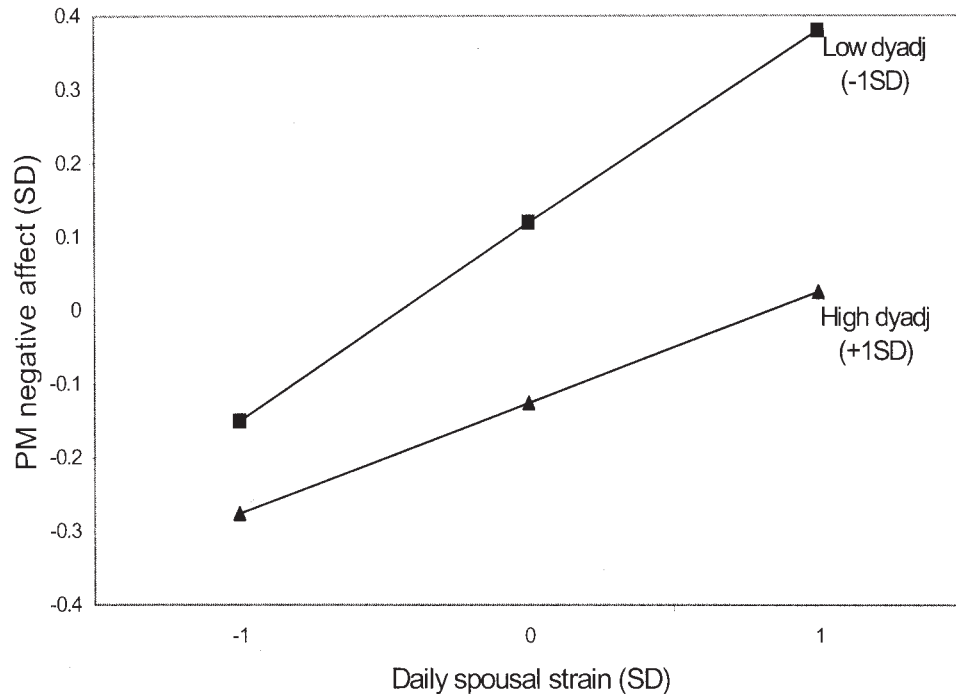


Figure 3. The role of dyadic adjustment (dyadj) in the relationship between daily spousal strain and p.m. negative affect.

unfolds over time (e.g., during post-event processing). Therefore, although the social strain reported by couples in the current study did not have a significant direct effect across days, it may have led to a lingering suspicious cognitive set.

Further examination of the pattern of the interaction between spousal support and spousal strain reveals the initially surprising result that spouses who reported low support together with low strain were at increased risk for subsequent negative affect. However, Vinokur and van Ryn (1993) have pointed out that marital relationships in which there is a low provision of support as well as a low level of negative behavior may be characterized by neglect and apathy preceding separation and divorce. In addition, relationship conflict may have beneficial influences over time in a marriage (DeLongis & Preece, 2002). There may be a balance between avoiding conflict in an effort to keep the peace and engaging in necessary conflict, which can act to facilitate or trigger resolution of important issues. In the current study, perhaps the association of increased negative affect across days with low spousal support and low spousal strain is a marker of the potential costs of avoiding conflict and the resultant short-term distress.

Distal Interpersonal Context

The perceived quality of a marriage can be conceptualized as a more stable, distal interpersonal context for supportive and negative spousal exchanges. In the current study, dyadic adjustment moderated the relationship be-

tween both spousal support and spousal strain with same-day negative affect but not the associations of spousal support and spousal strain with next-day negative affect. Individuals in marriages characterized by higher dyadic adjustment were seemingly partially buffered from the immediate negative effects due to lack of support or problematic interactions with their spouses. Overall marital quality might influence the success or failure of the repair process after negative interactions. In a study by Lorber (1997; unpublished manuscript cited in Carrere & Gottman, 1999), spouses who demonstrated a positive sentiment or positive mindset about their partners were more successful in relationship repair processes after laboratory conflict interaction tasks.

Consistent with our predictions, we found that dyadic adjustment was a significant predictor of negative affect across days while controlling for the prior day's spousal interactions. In contrast, dyadic adjustment did not have a main effect, despite its interactive effect with spousal strain and support, for the prediction of same-day negative affect. This was somewhat surprising given that marital quality has been consistently found to be related to well-being (Beach, Fincham, & Katz, 1998). However, unlike the current study, the associations between marital quality and psychological functioning have not been examined while concurrently controlling for the effects of the more immediate relationship variables of daily spousal support and spousal strain.

Fincham and Linfield (1997) found that marital quality influenced the retrospective account of behavior of spouses

over the past week but not of behavior over an immediately preceding interaction task. They speculated that judgments that occur immediately after an interaction are influenced more by information provided by the immediately preceding marital interactions. Over time, however, these authors proposed that spouses' judgments of their marital partners begin to progressively reflect global beliefs about marital quality. Extending this to our results, we note that same-day negative affect may have been influenced primarily by recent marital interactions, whereas next-morning negative affect may have been influenced by a more global consideration of relationship factors. Consequently, dyadic adjustment would be expected to be more strongly associated with negative affect in models specifying lagged versus immediate effects of the daily relationship variables.

Future Directions

The present study was designed to examine the associations of positive and negative social interactions with negative affect. Inclusion of measures of positive affect is an important direction for future research. Positive support exchanges may have a stronger effect on positive dimensions of well-being than on negative ones (Major et al., 1997). That is, positive exchanges between spouses may be associated with increases in feelings of joy, happiness, and contentment, and perhaps even with improved immune functioning. Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001), for example, point out that marital satisfaction contributes far more to happiness than did any other variable examined in their review of the literature. Given this, it seems reasonable to assume that positive day-to-day marital interactions are important for happiness as well. In addition, positive supportive exchanges may interact with marital quality in predicting positive affect in much the same way as they did in the present study to predict negative affect. That is, in the context of a good marriage, an affectionate gesture or an offer to help fold the laundry is likely to result in positive feelings. In the context of a poor marriage, however, these same offers of support might be interpreted suspiciously, therefore having a very different effect on mood. Regardless, it is unlikely that all positively toned support is equally effective in improving mood. For example, support offered in the form of affection likely functions very differently than does support offered in the form of advice. Perhaps to a greater extent than any other type of relationship, the marital relationship is one in which a wide array of supportive and critical exchanges are both possible and likely.

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