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Newlywed Reports of Social Support During Engagement: What Worked and What Failed

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This study investigated newlywed reports of social support during the engagement period via qualitative, in-depth interviews with 36 recently married heterosexual couples (N = 72 total interviews). Specifically, the study examined what worked and what failed in the social support process for engaged couples. Overall, results revealed that helpful support is generally more plentiful during the engagement period than unhelpful support, and emotional support is the most prevalent of the various types of social support. The most common providers of social support to engaged individuals were family members and friends. Finally, the study revealed that most people felt a sense of perceived support in their social networks if they were in need of it at any point during their engagements.

Keywords: Engagement; Interpersonal Communication; Marriage; Social Support

The period of engagement is a significant stage of life for many couples. As a couple prepares for their upcoming marriage, they will likely experience multiple changes. These can include a physical move, adjustments in the management of finances, adaptation to and inclusion of additional family members (i.e., in-laws), and reassignments of regular household duties. Additionally, there are emotional changes

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during the period of engagement, wherein the couple considers their expectations for marriage, detachment from close friends and families of origin, and establishment of a new life together (Fincham & Beach, 2010a, 2010b; Nissinen, 2000).

Nissinen (2000) suggests that for many people, being engaged results in multiple feelings, including "a combination of excitement, stress, bliss, and confusion" (p. 5). These emotions result not only from wedding event preparations but from other aspects of relational, geographic, emotional, and identity transition as well. Unfortunately, society often pressures engaged couples to maintain a state of constant happiness. If either member of the couple experiences "anything less than pure joy during this time," he or she may "think that there is something wrong with [his or her] relationship" (Nissinen, 2000, p. 16; see also Fincham & Beach, 2010a, 2010b). Thus, stress from wedding and marriage preparation can have significant effects on one's mental and physical health, as well as the future condition of the relationship.

When people experience a busy, stressful situation, they can lose touch with those closest in their lives. It is important for engaged individuals to "reconnect" with close friends and family members and even discuss wedding preparations with them. Essentially, these are solicitations of social support or behavior in response to another's needs (e.g., acts that communicate caring, provide validation or assist in coping with problems) (Cutrona, 1996). In addition to one's partner, potential support providers often are either family or friends—members of the individual's social network. Social support could potentially help an engaged individual cope with the stresses of this life transition.

Premarital social support from family and friends has been identified as a predictor of marital success (e.g., Kurdek, 1991; Whyte, 1990). The ecological (eco-systemic) perspective is explanatory of this finding. This theory, developed by Bubolz and Sontag (1993), suggests that a couple is a "developing system" that responds to biological, economic, and psychosocial influences within/outside of the system. Thus, the couple's relationship develops at "individual, couple, and contextual levels" (Larson & Holman, 1994, p. 229; see also Vaux, 1990).

Previous work (e.g., Booth & Johnson, 1988; Kurdek, 1991; Whyte, 1990) has assessed whether those involved in a relationship perceived and/or received support from family and friends but not (a) who provided social support during the engagement (e.g., friends, family, and important others) or (b) how support was evaluated by the recipients (i.e., helpful versus unhelpful). This study aimed to address these issues because understanding specific characteristics of received support (Goldsmith, 2004) is essential in order to improve supportive messages given to others during their time of engagement.

Engagement has similarities to dating relationships in that the couple may not yet share multiple aspects of their lives and they do not know one another as well as do married couples (and this is especially true for couples who have not cohabited). Indeed, engaged individuals often struggle with understanding how their role in their relationship might change after marriage (Nissinen, 2000). Nissinen refers to this phase as the, "liminal phase . . . the in-between state where he/she is no longer single

and not quite married'' (2000, p. 127). Yet, engaged couples show a likeness to marriage relationships by way of an established commitment to one another. Not only is the engagement phase not always fully understood by those involved but scholarly investigation of this relational period has been limited as well. In examining social support during engagement, this study sought to explore an understudied phenomenon.

Social Support and Social Networks

Although social support has been studied extensively in the past three decades, there have been discrepancies as to what constitutes social support. The concept has been defined, classified and measured in a variety of ways (Hobfoll, 2009; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Sarason & Sarason, 2009; Vangelisti, 2009). Definitions often describe different aspects of social support such as feelings of emotional closeness and communicating information that one is cared for, loved, valued, and belongs to a communication network (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

When the stresses of engagement and/or preparation for marriage become overwhelming, most individuals would desire the reassurance, encouragement, and help of someone in their social network. Social support is often classified into five general types: informational, tangible, emotional, network, and esteem (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Informational support is defined as giving information in the forms of facts, feedback, advice, or situational appraisal. Tangible support includes actual resources (i.e., money, gifts, a place to live) as well as assisting with tasks or performing services. Emotional support often communicates love, caring, empathy, or concern. Network support suggests a sense of belonging or membership in a group exhibiting similar characteristics or concerns. Finally, esteem support is defined as respect, confidence, or validation of an individual for his or her abilities, feelings, or actions. Each type of support could conceivably be beneficial to an engaged couple if provided appropriately.

However, it is important to recognize that support attempts are not always successful. As noted by past research (e.g., Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986; Lehman & Hemphill, 1990), support attempts intended to be helpful can fail, potentially causing negative outcomes. Whether support attempts are perceived as helpful or unhelpful depends on how support given from others ''matches'' the current needs of the receiver (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Muñoz et al., 2011; Uchino, Carlisle, Birmingham, & Vaughn, 2011). This required coordination between support needed and support given, known as the ''matching hypothesis,'' suggests that support given is considered supportive or helpful only when tailored to meet (or match) the specific needs of the one receiving the support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). If the support provided does not match the needs of the recipient, the results can increase psychological distress (Horowitz et al., 2001). For example, if a person could benefit from information but feels he or she needs emotional support at the time, receiving only informational support could increase distress because it is not the support the recipient currently needs.

Besides matching the kind of support given with the support needed by the recipient, the credibility or "appropriateness" of the support provider may affect whether the recipient perceives the support effort as helpful. According to Taylor (2007), "different kinds of support ... may be valued from different members of a social support network" (p. 151). For example, while emotional support tends to be considered helpful when given by close relational partners, the receiver may resent emotional support provided by less intimate, casual relational partners. Similarly, informational support may be considered helpful when received from someone with expertise on the subject, but it may be considered inappropriate or unhelpful from one possessing less credibility on the matter (e.g., Benson, Gross, Messer, Kellum, & Passmore, 1991; Dakof & Taylor, 1990). Thus, the nature of the relationship and the support provider's credibility influence whether social support is deemed as helpful or unhelpful by the recipient.

The social support provided by a spouse has been shown to be particularly effective in buffering the negative effects of stress and, many times, the spouse is the primary provider of support (Brock & Lawrence, 2010; Delongis, Holtzman, Puterman, & Lam, 2010; Julien & Markman, 1991; Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010). In fact, the lack of spousal social support is often a major cause of relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Gordon & Baucom, 2009; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Although a fiancé or fiancée is not yet officially a spouse, it is reasonable that each would look to the other for support prior to their marriage.

Romantic relationships (whether dating, engagement, or marriage) exist within the larger environment or network of relationships with family and friends, and social networks tend to affect relationships quickly. Parks, Stan, and Eggert (1983) suggest that close network members play a significant role in the development of romantic relationships. When involved in such a relationship, not only does an individual consider his or her own social network but the partner's network as well, including the support received from, the amount of communication with, and the number of people in that network. Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) found similar results when examining the support perceived from family and friends. The social networks of married couples have also been shown to provide social support in times of need (Kurdek, 1989). During either the minor or major stresses of planning a wedding or preparing for marriage, engaged individuals would presumably seek out these close relationships, assuming that the support would be available and hopefully effective. Thus, based on the review of literature, we asked the following research questions:

> RQ1: Whom do engaged individuals perceive as the primary providers of social support during the period of engagement?
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> RQ2: What types of social support messages and behaviors do engaged individuals find helpful and beneficial during the period of engagement?
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> RQ3: What types of social support messages and behaviors do engaged individuals find unhelpful and detrimental during the period of engagement?

Method

Participants

Both partners of 36 recently married heterosexual couples ($N = 72$) were interviewed for this study. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 33 years ($M = 24.47$). Almost all participants identified as White/Caucasian ($N = 70$; 97.2%), with 1 Asian/Pacific Islander (1.4%) and 1 Hispanic/Mexican American (1.4%). The vast majority indicated their religious affiliation as Christian ($N = 68$; 94.4%), with 4 indicating "Not Religious" (5.6%). Participants were mostly college educated (81.9%). Forty-one participants (56.5%) had a Bachelor's degree, 13 (18.1%) had a Bachelor's degree and some graduate work, 4 had a Master's degree (5.6%), and 1 had a doctoral degree (1.4%). Twelve participants (16.7%) had some college education and 1 (1.4%) had no college education. Marriage and engagement lengths were rounded to the closest half-month. Engagement lengths ranged from 3 months to 19.5 months ($M = 9.15$). Participants' marriage lengths ranged from 1 month to 31.5 months ($M = 14.01$). Most participants resided within the Midwestern region of the United States.

There were a number of requirements for participants' involvement in this study: (a) These individuals had not been married more than 3 years at the time of the interview, (b) neither spouse had been married previously, and (c) the couples did not cohabit prior to marriage. Although this study examined social support during engagement, data were collected *after* the couple were married. While retrospectively obtaining premarital data is not uncommon (e.g., Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985), this decision was intentional for a number of reasons. First, the period of engagement can be quite hectic for couples as they balance work/school obligations, relationships, and wedding preparation responsibilities; thus, the commitment of interviews could have been a burden or stressor during an already busy time. Second, because engagement can easily become stressful, any attempts of social network members to provide support may not have been perceived by the recipient as they were intended. Third, after a couple has been married for some time, they may be able to connect and apply the supportive messages and behaviors they received during engagement. Thus, time between the enactment/receipt of social support and the interview may have allowed for thoughtful reflection on behalf of the recipient.

The first author utilized "snowball" sampling to recruit participants. Additionally, the study was advertised in upper level undergraduate communication courses. Students in these courses were encouraged to participate or refer couples to the researchers. All methods and procedures utilized in this study were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Procedures

Participants were contacted via phone or e-mail by the first author and were given information about the study. If both the husband and wife agreed to participate, the first author scheduled an interview appointment with the couple. The majority

of the interviews took place in the couple's home. Couples not living in the immediate area were interviewed by telephone.

Before the interview began, all participants individually filled out an informed consent form and completed a questionnaire that requested demographic data (i.e., sex, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and education level) and information about their relationship (i.e., how long the couple had known one another, as well as the length of the couple's engagement period and marriage). After completing the brief questionnaire, each spouse was interviewed privately while the other spouse was in a separate location (e.g., another room). Prior to being asked the first question, the interviewee was given a brief handout defining social support and providing specific examples of each type (i.e., informational, tangible, emotional, network, and esteem). The purpose of this handout was to ensure each participant approached the questions with a similar understanding of the topic being discussed. This also ensured that participants would be able to reflect on and identify the more nuanced aspects of social support. Although the handout provided a taxonomy of social support (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992), participants had no difficulties identifying other kinds of helpful and unhelpful behavior that did not ''fit neatly'' with the types of social support provided (e.g., behavioral examples of a ''good marriage'' being helpful). Some interviewees referred to the handout's terminology, categories, and examples throughout the interview, although they were told that they were not required to do so.

Upon conclusion of the first interview, the second spouse was interviewed utilizing the same format. Most interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed by the first author. These transcriptions yielded 230 pages of single-spaced text. The first and second author reviewed all transcriptions for accuracy, and all identifying names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Three separate methods of analysis were utilized while examining the interview data. First, to determine providers of support, the authors made notes about the frequency with which different network members were named in support episodes (e.g., spouse, parent, friend). Second, a deductive coding process utilizing Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) categories of social support was used to determine types of support received (i.e., informational, tangible, emotional, network, and esteem). Third, an inductive data analytic technique examining the data line-by-line, using both open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006), was used for analyzing participants' responses regarding whether the behaviors or messages were perceived as helpful or unhelpful.

At the outset of the inductive coding, all three authors had multiple discussions about how the data would be organized and coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, the first and third authors coded and organized the data within spreadsheets in order to connect the participants' language with the codes and to provide an efficient way of collaborating on further analysis.

To begin the coding process, the first and third authors blind coded the first eight transcripts using mostly substantive codes (codes primarily derived from the

participants' own words; Charmaz, 2006) for helpful or unhelpful support themes. After the first pass, the authors collaborated in comparing/contrasting the substantive codes, sensemaking, and generating a codebook for more general codes from the substantive coding using axial coding and constant comparison methods (Charmaz, 2006). Once it was determined that both coders were using similar coding strategies, the blind coding continued for the first pass through the rest of the transcripts. After recoding using the codebook scheme and constant comparison methods, the authors again collaborated to compare/contrast and reach consensus on any discrepancies.

The open coding process required multiple passes through the data as the coding scheme was shaped through collaborative sensemaking, and coding was iterative and ongoing. The third author also created a matrix in order to distinguish further relationships within the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The authors collaborated to create initial themes and these themes were further collapsed into categories vis-à-vis the axial coding process (Charmaz, 2006).

Results

Research Question 1: Primary Providers of Social Support

Participants identified five general categories of social support providers during their periods of engagement: (a) family members, (b) friends, (c) counselors/mentors, (d) fiancé/fiancée, and (e) other. Among family members, parental figures were perceived as particularly prominent providers of social support for many participants, but siblings, grandparents, and more distant relatives (e.g., cousins) provided support as well. The category of friends was diverse and ranged from coworkers and classmates to members of the wedding party. Engaged individuals also found support from counselors or mentors. In many cases, this counseling was obtained through teachers, church members, or the couple's pastor and/or the pastor's wife from their church. Participants reported their partners providing social support as well. Other miscellaneous sources of support included wedding coordinators, books about marriage, and a chat room on a wedding website. Clearly, engaged individuals received support from a variety of sources.

Research Question 2: Helpful Social Support

In analyzing helpful social support messages and behaviors, all responses were coded in two ways: by the actual behavior or message and according to Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) five types of social support. Thus, the overarching categories reflect elements of specific behaviors and more general types of support. The five major categories of helpful social support were (a) emotional support during the stressful engagement period, (b) informational support about the marriage relationship, (c) tangible support for the wedding event, (d) esteem support regarding marriage and life decisions, and (e) network support from those who had "been through it."

Emotional support during the stressful engagement period

One of the most prominent categories of social support was the provision of emotional support during engagement. Many participants perceived emotional support as significantly helpful during the (sometimes) stressful engagement period. Emotional support came in various forms including encouragement, expressing enthusiasm, helping during stressful times, and even actual physical displays of caring. For instance, Joe recalled his fiancée helping him get through particularly stressful times when he said, "Sometimes when I was upset about something, Julia would hug me or just try to calm me down by holding my hand."

One form of emotional support that was of particular importance to many participants was when people would simply "be there" for them—whether that was simply listening to them vent, checking in to see how they were doing, or offering caring of any kind. Having this type of support was extremely beneficial for many participants. For example, Greg described the strong friendship of a fraternity brother, "He's one of those guys who was a very interested listener and I knew I could always talk to him, guy things. He was always a very stable rock for me, on the emotional support from a male perspective."

One of the other important aspects of emotional support for recipients was that people showed their excitement and happiness. Showing enthusiasm expressed that they cared about the participant. For example, Kristy said, "I think there was a lot of emotional support from everyone—everyone cared about us and everyone loved us. They were all really excited for us, and they made sure they showed that, so that was really good."

Informational support about the marriage relationship

Another prominent category of helpful and supportive behaviors/messages reported was receiving information, advice, or examples of personal experience regarding married life. The advice and information participants received varied, but most involved information regarding what to expect in marriage, personal experiences regarding how marriage "works," and advice about handling finances, communication, conflict, and cohabiting in the married context. Information about cohabiting was particularly important for our sample given that one of the criteria for participating in the study was that the couple had not lived together prior to their marriage.

While a smaller number of participants perceived information and advice about the actual wedding to be helpful, a vast majority of helpful informational support was regarding what followed the wedding—being married. Andrew's best man provided him with information about what to expect in marriage and shared some of his own experiences. Andrew said:

> My honorary best man, was going through the first year or two of his marriage, so he had some good advice about balancing your work life and your home life and going through the tougher times with money, personal relationships with friends. He stressed balances that he had to have with money, family life . . . things that were very good to hear.

Other participants received helpful information regarding how to handle specific situations in marriage. Allison mentioned that her friends provided informational

support. She said her friends stressed that "Money was a big thing, conflict management was another thing we talked about."

Interestingly, other participants found what could be perceived as "negative" information about marriage to be helpful because it helped them have realistic expectations of what marriage is like. For example, Liz commented that the following information was helpful: "In our marriage counseling, they said 'expect to see the worst of each other when you get married.'" Numerous participants also mentioned how others provided support indirectly by being informational examples of what married life is like. Participants mentioned how being able to observe others' marriages, learning from their triumphs and mistakes, was helpful. In these cases, providers did not necessarily know they were providing support, but the examples providers set met engaged individuals' needs. For instance, Keith mentioned:

> Watching my parents and . . . other married people in general, watching them interact and how they treated each other . . . how they really cared for each other. You'd see some people that did and others that you could tell they did things you didn't want to do.

Tangible support for the wedding event

Participants also found tangible support helpful, and the vast majority of tangible support received was for the actual wedding event—either through helping plan and arrange the wedding or providing financial support to pay for the wedding. The other few offers of tangible support consisted of helping set up the house the couple would be living in and giving gifts at showers or parties. One participant recalled that her future mother-in-law and sister-in-law made the programs for her wedding "just completely on their own. We didn't even have to tell them anything, we handed it all to them." Similarly, Shawna was able to rely on her mother for an even greater variety of tangible support for her upcoming wedding. She noted, "My mom was like my own personal wedding planner. She made almost every call for me, just setting up things, making sure things got done."

Esteem support regarding marriage and life decisions

Participants found acceptance and validation of their decisions regarding getting engaged, planning the wedding, and marriage in general to be very helpful. For example, Patrick's coworkers provided him with helpful esteem support by validating his decision: "A lot of my friends from the office . . . said it was the best decision I'd ever make in my life, they were proud of me . . . that reassured me, helped me believe that I was going to be happy." Having validation of their choice to get married was important for many participants. For example, Trisha mentioned how the validation of friends and family members was meaningful, particularly in light of the fact that some of her friends thought she was getting married too quickly:

> Those people [friends and family members] were there to reiterate that the path we were going on wasn't so far off track and that we were doing the right things . . . it was a big encouragement to have that in the midst of such frustration.

Helpful esteem support was also provided through reassurances of their abilities to be good marriage partners. For example, Kristy discussed how esteem support from her fiancé was especially helpful. She noted, "Steve would tell me that I was going to be a great wife."

Network support from those who had "been through it"

Engaged individuals reported network support as being helpful—especially when they had people in their network who were engaged or married and could relate to their experiences. Heidi discussed how network support from engaged individuals in her church was helpful because they could relate to her experiences:

> Our Sunday School was really good with network support. There were a lot of people our age, a lot of newly engaged couples too that were going through the same thing, so we were able to feel out the problems and figure out advice they'd been given.

Additionally, Steve discussed the value of the support he received from a couple who was recently married:

> [He] and his wife were good at giving me network support because they were married, but they're still young, and so, they made me feel like it's a great thing to do, to say "we love it and we know you will too and you were made for it."

In summary, demonstrations of social support participants reported receiving during the engagement period were categorized by actual message or behavior as well as by Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) five social support types. While participants reported helpful examples of each support type, they were able to identify support they did not consider beneficial as well.

Research Question 3: Unhelpful Social Support

Participants were also asked about messages and behaviors they did not consider helpful during engagement. Their answers regarding unhelpful support provide somewhat of a mirror image of behaviors and messages that were also deemed helpful. Unhelpful behaviors and messages were delivered in numerous forms, but the three major categories of unhelpful support were (a) unhelpful, negative, or missing information regarding marriage, (b) disagreements and negativity regarding the wedding, and (c) being excessively *involved* or *uninvolved*.

Unhelpful, negative, or missing information regarding marriage

Although some participants mentioned how learning about the negative aspects of marriage was useful because it helped them have realistic expectations (e.g., RQ2), overall, many participants found negative information about marriage to be

discouraging. This could be categorized as unhelpful informational support, but it also could be categorized as unhelpful emotional support because it affected participants' emotions as well. For example, Rachel commented, ''Sometimes Will's family jokes about marriage. His mom said that marriage ruined her and his dad is on his third marriage . . . people who were bitter about marriage, talked about divorce, their comments weren't helpful . . . just the negative views on marriage.'' Additionally, when Trisha sought confirmation of her decision to get married, she found that some of her single girlfriends shared negative feedback, as they ''thought I was moving too fast.'' Other participants indicated that there was information about the marriage and/or the wedding that they wished they had received but did not. Thus, the lack of informational support provided was unhelpful. For instance, some participants wished they had learned about various aspects of married life from support providers including information about sex, living with someone of the opposite sex, dividing chores/responsibilities/time, and how to handle certain situations in marriage (again, this was especially true for our sample of couples who had not cohabited prior to marriage). For example, Jennifer shared:

> In all honesty, I think the male-female role when it comes to sex would have been helpful, because that's a big difference. Neither of us were really aware of how the female needs are different from the male needs and how those come together.. . .We hadn't really talked about that or were aware of it before and so it was a very in-your-face issue.

Darren spoke of how he wished he had received more informational support about marriage:

> No one ever told me, you get married, you think you know them, and you freaking have no clue six months into it who the heck you've married, because they're . . . totally different. I wasn't prepared for that . . . no one said how hard it really is to be married.

Although most participants wished they had more informational support about marriage and married life in general, many others wished they had informational support about the wedding event. Using a matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the third author found a difference between those who wanted informational support about marriage versus those who wanted informational support about the wedding. The nuance that separates these participants is the length of time they were engaged or had known each other. For those who had known each other for shorter periods of time or had short engagement periods, information about marriage was very important. In contrast, those who knew each other for longer periods of time, were used to making joint decisions, or had gone through other significant life events together, were more concerned about the wedding. For example, James, who was engaged for a year, said, ''I wish someone would have told me wear comfortable shoes the day I was getting married!''

Disagreements and negativity regarding the wedding

Another major category of unhelpful messages or behaviors was disagreement or general negativity regarding aspects of the wedding (e.g., arguments over basic wedding details). In many cases, what began as helpful behavior, such as assisting with wedding preparations or playing an official role in the wedding (as in the example below), evolved into differing viewpoints, resulting in unhelpful responses to engaged individuals. In some cases, these opposing opinions even evolved into a conflict among individuals. Paula discussed how her sister caused a negative situation that resulted in more stress for her and her other bridesmaids. She noted:

> I had had the bridesmaids' dresses picked out and ordered and had already paid for them. My sister got hers and hated it and threw a fit about it and said she would not be in the wedding if she had to wear that dress. She had helped me pick it out and order it and then she hated it. She made all of my bridesmaids who live all different places take it back, go through the hassle of getting their money back, all in a five-month period!

Other participants mentioned how they wished others had validated individual qualities or decisions about the wedding. For example, Megan reported that her fiancé would not validate her opinions or trust her decisions. She said, "He kind of fought me on things sometimes, things I knew needed to get done. He wouldn't just trust me on things."

Being excessively involved *or* uninvolved

Participants definitely felt the tension between others being too involved or uninvolved in planning for the wedding or preparing for marriage. An important nuance that helped distinguish whether involvement was viewed as excessive was *how* the support providers were involved. Those who were involved in noncontrolling, laid-back ways were perceived to be more helpful, while support providers perceived as pushy were viewed as excessively involved. For example, Holly commented that even though a support provider had good intentions, her "bossy" manner was unhelpful and even irritating. Holly said, "She's extremely opinionated and a little bossy, but you know she's always very well intentioned. She gave us a lot of support, but at the same time, I wanted to do it myself." Other participants talked about how some of their support providers were so involved with the wedding planning, or the relationship, that they became burdensome. For example, Leslie gave the following example of her mother's involvement:

> Talking about the nitty-gritty detail of the wedding planning. Sometimes my mom would get real excited about stuff and she's really good with details, so she would want to keep narrowing things and defining things more specifically... and that would stress me out.

Others found it unhelpful that some people in their network were mostly uninvolved. For example, Steve never felt his younger brother was interested in the upcoming

wedding. Steve said, "He was totally uninvolved, kind of frustrating. He never asked us any questions about the wedding or anything. He asked where it was like two weeks before. He was my best man."

Other participants reported wanting network support during their engagements but not receiving it to the extent they desired as it was not available within their existing networks. The majority of participants who reported this lack of involvement from their network were specifically looking for other married or engaged couples who could support them vis-à-vis their shared experiences. For example, Holly felt "by herself" and alone because most of her friends were not married. She said:

> I was remembering my friends from college and that's always been really hard because I have one pretty good friend that's married and the rest of them aren't necessarily even dating, so I felt like I was kind of by myself.

Similarly, Brad, speaking generally about his network said, "I just felt like I could not communicate to them what I was feeling, what I was thinking, which in and of itself is frustrating. I felt like very few people understood."

Additionally, Kristy illustrated the "matching hypothesis" (Cutrona & Russell, 1990) because even though her mother helped plan the wedding and offered copious amounts of tangible support, Kristy really wanted emotional support. Thus, Kristy ultimately perceived her mother as being "not that involved really" and later commented about how important emotional support was for her at the time. She said:

> My mom . . . she helped plan the wedding, but as far as making the big changes, she wasn't right there all of the time. She was more into the "get everybody dressed, let me call the caterer," she wanted to do that kind of supportive thing, which was a huge help and took a lot of stress off me, but it wasn't all the support that I needed right then.

Other participants felt loved ones' minimal involvement was evidenced by a lack of excitement about the wedding. For example, Paula lamented, "Like in the movies, you desire your father to be so excited that you're so beautiful . . . my dad didn't say anything to me when he saw me for the first time! I wish he would have said something to me."

Discussion

Results of this study suggest a number of patterns regarding engaged individuals and social support. First, engaged individuals often rely on specific groups of individuals with whom they have close relationships for social support during the engagement period. For example, both family members and friends were reported as primary providers of support (RQ1). Of the support reported by engaged individuals, the vast majority was deemed helpful with the most frequently cited helpful type being emotional and then informational (RQ2). Engaged individuals also considered a number of messages and behaviors from providers unhelpful or unsupportive, many

of which stemmed from disagreement between the provider and receiver over aspects of the upcoming wedding or marriage (RQ3). Further, in retrospect, some participants were able to recall support messages and behaviors that they wished they had received (mostly information about marriage) from their support networks because they could have buffered some of their stress.

Research Question 1: Primary Providers of Social Support

Although a number of scholars have found spouses to be effective support providers (Julien & Markman, 1991; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998), future spouses were named as support providers much less frequently than were other individuals with whom engaged individuals had existing relationships. Perhaps the stress of the impending wedding or marriage makes an engaged individual reticent to provide or solicit support from his or her partner. On the other hand, perhaps participants viewed support from their romantic partner as a ''given,'' so they may not have reflected on or reported the support that their partners might have provided.

Family and friends comprised the largest portions of engaged individuals' support networks. As Parks et al. (1983) suggested, it appears the social network plays a significant role during engagement, with a majority of individuals in the current study receiving support from family and friends during the engagement period. Engaged individuals may feel comfortable seeking and receiving support from such sources with whom they have established relationships, as the provider may have provided helpful support in the past in other stressful circumstances (Hobfoll, 2009), as well as the fact that the provider may be familiar with the engaged individual's romantic relationship.

Research Question 2: Helpful Social Support

As previously mentioned, the presence of premarital social support has been shown to predict marital success, but research has yet to elaborate on the content of this support. In the current study, emotional support during the stressful engagement period, informational support about the marriage relationship, tangible support for the wedding event, esteem support regarding marriage and life decisions, and network support from those who had ''been through it'' were deemed most helpful. Receiving support from those who had ''been through it'' is consistent with Nissinen's (2000) statement that individuals (i.e., both brides and grooms) yearn to connect with people who can understand what they are experiencing during engagement.

The majority of helpful social support was classified as emotional. Based on many participants' desires for emotional support, many may have felt uncertain about upcoming changes, thus simultaneously desiring the encouragement and affirmation provided by their support networks. Considering the stress engaged individuals might endure during the transitions from dating relationships to engagement to marriage, it also makes sense that engaged individuals would want close friends and family to ''be there'' and to provide ''everyday'' support (Sarason & Sarason,

2009; Werking, 1997). Since all participants were entering marriage for the first time, the transition to the marriage relationship was unlike any other they had experienced. Thus, it is understandable that they would benefit from and desire information, advice, and anecdotes about marriage relationships—particularly regarding wife/ husband roles and how to participate effectively in the marriage relationship (Nissinen, 2000).

Many participants also reported tangible support as being helpful. This support was most useful for the wedding itself. One possible explanation for the recollection and appreciation of this support stems from the age of the participants in this study. Male participants in the current study were about four years younger than the national median age at first marriage, and women were about two years younger as defined by the 2012 United States Census Bureau data on marriage and divorce (see also Coontz, 2013). Though the majority of participants (nearly 82%) had completed a college education by the time of marriage, they likely had not spent a great deal of time supporting themselves financially nor had they fully established a home, making monetary resources for wedding expenses or gifts for the couples' homes especially useful.

Research Question 3: Unhelpful Social Support

The third research question inquired about the messages and behaviors deemed unhelpful or even detrimental by participants. The most frequently cited unhelpful messages and behaviors revolved around marriage, disagreements and negativity over wedding aspects, and excessive involvement or uninvolvement in preparations. Clearly these unhelpful messages and behaviors range in magnitude and significance. A disagreement between an engaged individual and another over a wedding event detail is far less consequential than a disagreement over the individual's choice of whom or when to marry.

As cited by several participants, the unhelpful message or behavior shared was not always intended to be unhelpful. Rather, many social network members believed their words and actions were useful and beneficial, even though the participant might not have perceived them in that way. This reflects the matching hypothesis (Cutrona & Russell, 1990) and is similar to Albrecht, Burleson, and Goldsmith's (1994) discussion of unhelpful social support: "some attempts at support do more harm than good . . . even when members of our network are trying to be helpful rather than critical or disagreeable, their support attempts may be unwelcome or inappropriate" (p. 432; see also Rini & Dunkel-Schetter, 2010). Alternatively, participants reported receiving other messages and behaviors that were deliberate attempts to complicate the situation or to cause problems for the engaged individuals. This is consistent with Lehman and Hemphill's (1990) findings of unhelpful and upsetting support attempts for multiple sclerosis patients, suggesting that across a variety of stressful situations, some providers make poor choices in the ways they frame their support. In this particular study, patients reported "incidents in which others were clearly not intending to be helpful" (p. 572), and one such theme of unhelpful support included

maximization and catastrophizing the disease or its consequences. As previously stated, not every participant could recall an unhelpful message or behavior as easily as a socially supportive one. This point, coupled with the numerous examples of useful support is encouraging, suggesting that the helpful messages and behaviors outweigh the unhelpful during the period of engagement (or at least are far more memorable). However, there are a number of important considerations pertaining to the issue of unhelpful social support (RQ3). First, some participants did not immediately share unhelpful messages or behaviors, stating that they could not remember any. Second, other participants thought of an unhelpful message or behavior at a later point in the interview (and not when they were initially prompted). There was certainly more hesitancy to share unhelpful support attempts than successful ones.

These types of responses (or lack thereof) may be attributable to several factors. First, the nature of a retrospective account may not fully capture the feelings an engaged individual held at the time of the unhelpful message or behavior. Perhaps with time, a message or behavior that is perceived as unhelpful may have become less salient or extreme, and thus ''[lost its] sting'' (Lehman & Hemphill, 1990, p. 572). Second, perhaps the same people providing helpful support were also sharing unhelpful messages and behaviors; thus, the individual may overlook the unhelpful in light of plentiful helpful support (and this is similar to work by Dakof and Taylor [1990] who examined cancer patients' perceptions of helpful/unhelpful messages, and Lehman et al. [1986] who examined grieving spouses' perceptions of helpful/unhelpful messages).

Additionally, participants may have been unwilling to criticize a friend or family member because of social desirability, either personally or on behalf of their network. Some may have felt asking their network for support would have been an admission they were ill-prepared for such a life transition. Any concerns they may have had at that time could have contributed to their need for emotional support. If participants sought support and then still did not receive the type or amount desired, they may have felt this would reflect poorly on them or members of their support network. In short, they wanted to save ''face'' for themselves as well as those important to them (Goldsmith & Parks, 1990). At the same time, one must consider that in any new situation, it is hard to know what is needed in advance. As a number of participants observed, ''you just have to experience it [marriage] for yourself.''

Finally, the support participants found unhelpful may have not been hurtful so much as simply *uncomfortable.* As a result, participants may have chosen not to talk about it in detail or at all. It is not uncommon for a person to minimize or avoid discussing issues he or she finds troubling or that cause uneasiness. Sass and Mattson (1999) contrast the typical conceptualizations of support as serving ''a wholly positive purpose in a recipient's life'' and consisting of ''messages that comfort'' (p. 517) with the alternative view that support can consist of confrontational communication that encourages positive behavior. In Sass and Mattson's study, that positive behavior was adherence to commitments. It is not unreasonable to think that some support deemed unhelpful was interpreted as such because it was uncomfortable for an engaged individual to receive. For example, if a support provider were to remind

an engaged individual of the importance of sharing decision making with one's spouse once married, the support recipient may have felt uncomfortable.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The sample in this study was a snowball sample. In addition, strict criteria for participation were imposed to keep engagement and marriage experiences as similar as possible, eliminating possible confounding factors such as a previous marriage, years of marriage, or cohabiting prior to marriage. As a result, comparisons could be made among couples with as comparable engagement experiences as could be controlled for. However, these strategies resulted in participants having quite similar demographic characteristics (i.e., ethnicity, religious affiliation, educational level). Although participants interviewed via phone were located across the country, many were originally from the Midwest or had only recently moved to their current residence. While controlling for some variables helps create a more homogenous sample, it limits generalizability across engagement relationships. Future investigations should explore additional demographic characteristics and engagement experiences. For instance, the social support offered and/ or desired during engagement to couples when one or both partners have been previously married could look considerably different than the results of the present study.

This study was a first attempt to examine the specific social support messages and behaviors received during engagement. Now that the question of "what?" has been preliminarily answered with regard to support provided to this group, future research can delve deeper into the "how?" and "why?" questions about the support process. In other words, future participants (support receivers) could do more than report the support they were given, but go a step further to evaluate it beyond whether or not it was helpful and/or unhelpful.

Additional potential areas for future research include a longitudinal study addressing the differences in desired support before and after the wedding, sex differences, similarities in social support (of both providers and receivers), and an examination of the effects of social support on health during the first years of marriage. To avoid retrospective accounts and their inherent biases, a similar study could be conducted with currently engaged individuals, and perhaps in a longitudinal format to capture changes and trends in support across the engagement (and into the marriage) period. In addition, because of the significantly homogeneous sample in terms of demographic characteristics like religion, the role of Midwest conservative Christian culture and its impact on perceptions of social support given and received, as well as perceptions regarding traditional gender roles within marriage, could be examined.

Finally, an important perspective that should be examined is that of the social support provider. There are likely challenges and considerations from the support provider stance that might factor into the choice and motivation(s) to offer social support, as well as the frequency and type of such provision. The provider's evaluation of the support's effectiveness, in addition to the risks and rewards of providing it, are also worthy of study. Given that some of the unhelpful support messages and behaviors were not merely off-handed comments and instead developed into conflict

situations, it would be useful to further examine the presence and development of conflict between support provider and recipient. In such a study, comparison and contrast of both perspectives would be essential.

Summary and Practical Applications

The results of this study should be considered the first step toward a better understanding of the complex, (sometimes) confusing, evolving, and exciting stage of engagement. Engaged individuals are intertwined with their social networks during engagement and can utilize these networks to help them through what can be a stressful time of transition. Likewise, members of this network ought to consider the ways in which they can best support an engaged individual. Both have important roles in positively affecting the engagement period.

The key conclusion stemming from this study for a provider is to be in tune with the support needed by the engaged individual, rather than simply offering what he or she deems most useful at any given moment. Providers should also consider that recipients in this study appreciated the honesty and openness of their support providers. This was especially true with regard to sharing information and real-life experiences in marriage, but with the providers' caveats that their experiences were just that: theirs. Clearly, an effective support provider is someone who has perceived credibility, intuitive knowledge of the situation and the recipient's needs for support, as well as the discretion to provide the specific support that will be most helpful. Although certain conversations may seem like dangerous territory (e.g., sex), perhaps, if broached carefully and thoughtfully, they could be beneficial and informative, even if such support risks being *uncomfortable* (Sass & Mattson, 1999). Providers should also consider the timing and method of their support in order to better the chance of it being helpful.

Moreover, it appears that simply "being there" (Werking, 1997), showing enthusiasm or excitement, and checking in to see how the individuals are doing can have a tremendous impact on engaged couples' levels of stress. Also, because the *format* or manner of support affects perceptions of whether the support was helpful, general positivity (a relational maintenance behavior; Stafford & Canary, 1991) can also buffer anxiety experienced during the engagement period. Most individuals will encounter engaged individuals within their networks at some point during the lifespan. While those engaged individuals will likely experience varying levels of stress over their impending vows, this study suggests that providers can potentially make a meaningful difference in the engagement period through their provision of thoughtful, personalized social support.

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