



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Examining Family Communication Patterns and Seeking Social Support Direct and Indirect Effects Through Ability and Motivation

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Seeking social support remains a relatively understudied aspect of supportive communication. By integrating the literatures on family communication patterns (FCPs) and supportive communication, this study examines dispositional factors that influence support seeking in particular situations. Specifically, communicative ability and motivation to seek support were theorized to mediate the relationship between FCPs and recalled strategies of support seeking. Results from a sample (N = 352) of undergraduate students not only demonstrate that people's FCPs impart different levels of communicative ability and motivation to seek support, but also indirectly influence people's strategies of support seeking. Ability and motivation also directly influence support seeking, and several of these effects are moderated by participants' sex.

Keywords: Supportive Communication, Support Seeking, Communicative Ability, Motivation to Seek Support, Family Communication Patterns, Indirect Effects, Moderated Mediation.

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Effective supportive communication provides psychological, physical, and relational benefits to those who seek it. Individuals who maintain connections with support providers benefit from lower levels of depression, brightened affect, and enhanced self-esteem (Bodie, 2011; Holmstrom, Russell, & Clare, 2013; MacGeorge, Feng, & Burlseson, 2011). Despite these benefits, people do not acquire high-quality support automatically; rather, effective support might not materialize unless people seek it.

Seeking social support, however, remains a relatively understudied aspect of supportive communication. As the "first act" in the process of supportive communication, the way people seek support can affect the remainder of an interaction (MacGeorge et al., 2011). The quality of the support people receive is contingent upon how they

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seek it, and people who seek support directly often receive sophisticated forms of comfort (Caughlin et al., 2008; Scott, Caughlin, Donovan-Kicken, & Mikucki-Enyart, 2013).

Extant research on seeking support typically focuses on the likelihood of seeking support, the types of support sought, or the sources who are targeted when people are faced with a stressor (MacGeorge et al., 2011). Scholars also investigate proximal factors, such as the stressor, the context, or the relationship between interactants, as determinants of support seeking behavior (Barbee, Gulley, & Cunningham, 1990; Mortenson, 2009; Peterson, 2010). Although context is important, we seek to understand durable factors that influence individuals' support seeking behavior (see Collins & Feeney, 2000; Mortenson, Burleson, Feng, & Liu, 2009).

Bridge and Schrot (2013) argued that "family communication and social processes provide the primary mechanisms through which children develop social competencies" (p. 2). These competencies emerge from observing communication, and they influence the way family members act with each other and with those outside of the family. They impact people's goals, strategies, and behavior in a variety of interpersonal contexts (Bridge & Schrot, 2013; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Family communication patterns (FCPs) produce behaviors and preferences that develop over time, those to which a person might reasonably default when they are distressed, regardless of context.

The primary goal of this study is to describe why people seek support in certain ways by assessing whether FCPs influence support seeking. More specifically, we examine whether FCPs indirectly shape support seeking in particular situations because of the influence they exert on people's ability and motivation to seek support. Before presenting our hypotheses and research questions, we review research on seeking social support and FCPs.

Seeking social support

MacGeorge et al. (2011) defined support seeking as "intentional communicative activity with the aim of eliciting supportive actions from others" (p. 330). Except for a few notable exceptions (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Mortenson, 2009; Peterson, 2010), support seeking has received comparatively less scholarly attention than the related processes of support provision and message evaluation (MacGeorge et al., 2011). Prior research on support seeking focuses on the amount or type of support people seek (Norberg, Lindblad, & Boman, 2006; Xu & Burleson, 2001), or how certain goals influence behavior (see Caughlin et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2013). These findings are valuable for understanding the contingencies of a particular stressor, but they provide less insight into the durable factors that shape support seeking behavior. Individuals seek support in various ways (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995); however, little research has examined why people are compelled to do so in predictable patterns.

One dimension scholars have used to differentiate support seeking behavior is the directness or indirectness of people's communication. According to Barbee and

Cunningham (1995), direct support seeking indicates a clear desire for help by asking for assistance or displaying obvious signs of distress. Goldsmith (1995) suggested that direct support seeking can be interpreted as “behaviors that openly discuss the problem and/or feelings, explicitly ask for help, do not attempt to hide negative affect, and express nonverbal conversational involvement” (p. 425). People enact direct strategies of support seeking by describing the details of a problem, requesting aid, crying about a problem, pouting dramatically, or touching a partner to indicate distress.

Indirect support seeking, on the other hand, is a subtler and often less informative form of seeking support. Indirect support seeking involves minimization of a problem, attempts to change the topic, and nonverbal distancing behaviors (Goldsmith, 1995). Specifically, making global complaints, joking about a problem, sighing, sulking, fidgeting, and avoiding eye contact are all means of indirectly seeking support (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Thus, the direct or indirect nature of communication describes variation in how people seek support.

The benefits of direct, explicit, or clear communication have been reported in several contexts. When people communicate clearly and directly, they increase message comprehension (Solomon, 1997), and being able to clearly construct messages increases the likelihood that communicators reduce uncertainty and accomplish their goals (Knobloch, 2006). Direct communication reduces depression, enhances relationship satisfaction, and improves self-esteem (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Turrissi, & Johansson, 2005; Robertson, Kutcher, Bird, & Grasswick, 2001). Indirect communication and topic avoidance, conversely, are negatively associated with satisfaction (Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Theiss, 2011).

Although little research has systematically examined variation in support seeking, direct or indirect seeking behaviors influence the support people receive (Mortenson, 2009). A main predictor of a support provider’s behavior is the strategies support seekers employ to request assistance (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Direct requests for support more reliably elicit quality responses than indirect means of support seeking (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Derlega, Winstead, Oldfield, & Barbee, 2003). For example, direct support seeking by individuals coping with HIV elicited relatively involving forms of support that decreased depression (Derlega et al., 2003). Although research contends that seeking support influences outcomes, we know less about the precursors associated with support seeking or how people are socialized to perform this act.

Linking ability and motivation to seeking social support

The literatures on supportive message production and processing both agree that people who possess more ability and motivation achieve better outcomes in supportive interactions than individuals who lack these qualities (see Bodie, 2011; Burleson, 1983, 1985). Before suggesting that ability and motivation influence support seeking, we describe how ability and motivation have previously been linked to supportive communication.

Producing and processing supportive messages

Ability and motivation increase individuals' efficacy and likelihood of producing effective supportive messages. Burleson (1985), for example, found that cognitively complex individuals and people with higher levels of social skill are more able to identify and synthesize contextual information to produce sophisticated messages. In terms of motivation, highly empathic individuals have been found to be motivated support providers, and they produce more sensitive messages than people with less empathy (Burleson, 1983). MacGeorge (2001) also observed that motivation increases the number of messages that support providers produce.

Most recent research on processing supportive messages stems from the dual process model of supportive message outcomes (Bodie, 2011; Burleson et al., 2011). This model asserts that supportive messages produce maximum impact when recipients thoroughly process their content and that in-depth processing only occurs when receivers possess sufficient ability and motivation (Bodie, 2011). Personal qualities can enhance people's ability to process messages (Holmstrom et al., 2013) and Burleson et al. (2011) noted that people engage messages most extensively when they are motivated to do so. According to this model, ability and motivation heighten receivers' processing of supportive messages.

Seeking supportive communication

Similar to their influence on support provision and message evaluation, ability and motivation likely facilitate effective support seeking. In fact, prior research highlights the benefits of heightened ability on support seeking. Mortenson (2009) specifically documented that social skill improves people's support-seeking behavior. In particular, adaptability, which is defined as an interactant's ability to perceive variation in interpersonal interactions and adjust his or her behavior accordingly (Duran, 1992), might be an especially important skill for support seeking.

As previously stated, communicators who adapt messages to the nuances of a context are regarded as effective support providers (Burleson, 2003). People in need of assistance must manage the multiple demands of a support provider, stressor, and context to effectively state their desire for support. Accordingly, adaptability is the component of ability that we examine in this study. Overall, skilled communicators approach supportive interactions more directly than people with less skill (Burleson, 2003), and skilled support seekers are expected to seek support in ways that most directly remedy their troubles. The association between communicative ability and support seeking is posited in the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a positive association between communicative ability and direct support seeking and a negative association between ability and indirect support seeking.

People are motivated to alleviate the burdens associated with stressors and to enhance their well-being (Thoits, 1995). Motivation is, therefore, an important predictor of help-seeking behavior (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). People also approach supportive interactions in a more involved and engaged manner when they are highly

motivated (Bodie, 2011). Researchers contend that motivation can enhance support message production and processing. Likewise, we posit that motivation elicits direct support seeking. Thus, the second hypothesis is forwarded:

H2: There is a positive association between motivation and direct support seeking and a negative association between motivation and indirect support seeking.

Although we acknowledge that situational factors (e.g., problem severity) influence support seeking ability and motivation, we follow prior research that emphasizes the importance of dispositional qualities (see Collins & Feeney, 2000). We assert that socialization influences people's ability and motivation and, in turn, their strategies of support seeking. The directness with which people seek support in particular situations is likely influenced by their learned communication behavior.

(Revised) Family communication patterns

FCPs shape people's behavior in a variety of interpersonal contexts (see Bridge & Schrodt, 2013; Schrodt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008), and many scholars have taken a FCP approach to studying communication (see Schrodt et al., 2008). Developed originally by McLeod and Chaffee (1972), FCPs describe a family's tendency to develop and enact fairly stable ways of communicating. In 1990, Ritchie and Fitzpatrick extended this model to assess families' general communication patterns. Like social learning theory (Kunkel, Hummert, & Dennis, 2008), which asserts that people acquire stable patterns of behavior through observation of their external environment, people learn how to communicate by observing interactions within and among their family. This process of socialization provides people with skills and proclivities for communication that they can apply to specific interactions and partners (Koerner & Cvancara, 2002).

FCPs are rooted in communication and emphasize how the communication practices people observe shape their behavior in subsequent situations. More specifically, the strategies for seeking support to which people default in particular situations are likely learned over time and influenced by other's behavior. As Burleson (1990) noted, "comforting skills developed in a progressive manner over the course of childhood and adolescence and were influenced by parents' behavior" (p. 80). FCPs highlight the learned nature of communication and influence behavior in interactions with parents, friends, and romantic partners (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Ledbetter, 2009). They also shape preferences for communication (e.g., privacy orientation) that span specific partners, topics, and interactions (see Bridge & Schrodt, 2013; Kunkel et al., 2008).

The Revised Family Communication Patterns instrument (RFCP; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) refines the original model by focusing on conformity and conversation orientations. Broadly, conformity speaks to whether family members have similar attitudes, values, and beliefs, whereas the conversation orientation reveals whether members encourage or constrain communication (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Interactions high in conformity stress harmony and conflict avoidance, and low conformity reflects individuality. Interactions high in conversation favor open interaction without limiting topics; families low in conversation restrain thoughts and feelings.

Individuals from high conversation-oriented families tend to view interaction as rewarding and approach communication with trait-like tendencies (Avtgis, 1999). These individuals are more likely to discuss sensitive topics (Booth-Butterfield & Sidelinger, 1998) and personal matters (Huang, 1999), and they are less likely to avoid conflict than individuals with lower conversation orientations (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Furthermore, people with a strong conversation orientation are often skilled at maintaining relationships (Koesten, 2004) and are motivated to manage conflict (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Along these lines, a strong conversation orientation positively predicts people's interpersonal skill and their amount of support seeking (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997; Koesten, 2004; Ledbetter, 2009). Conversely, individuals who are socialized into a low conversation orientation tend to be less interpersonally skilled and report more apprehension, avoidance, and stress (Schrodt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007).

A strong conformity orientation tends to discourage skill development, perhaps by reducing people's capability to adapt to interpersonal situations (see Ledbetter, 2009). Rather than encouraging interpersonal skills and self-expression, people socialized into highly conformity-oriented families often adhere to strict norms, rules, and a culture of homogeneity that limits the expression of personal needs (Avtgis, 1999). Thus, the following hypotheses are posed:

H3: There is a positive association between strength of conversation orientation and (a) communicative ability, and (b) motivation to seek social support.

H4: There is a negative association between strength of conformity orientation and communicative ability.

The association between conformity orientation and motivation to seek support is less clear. People in strong conformity-oriented families often value interdependence, conflict avoidance, and harmony (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997), thereby suggesting little motivation to seek support for personal problems. Conversely, a conformity orientation is associated with depression (Schrodt et al., 2007), and people from highly conformity-oriented families might be motivated to seek support because comfort might not be forthcoming from their family. Thus, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: Is there an association between strength of conformity orientation and motivation to seek support?

To this point, we have posited that there are direct associations between FCPs and people's communicative ability and motivation to seek social support. Ability and motivation were also previously hypothesized to correspond with strategies of support seeking (i.e., direct vs. indirect). This logic implies that people's communicative ability

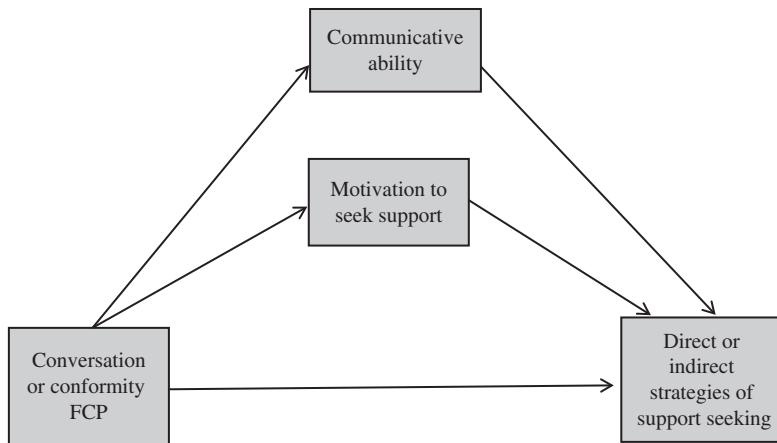


Figure 1 Conceptual diagram of the mediation model used to test H5, H6, and RQ2. Models were run such that either conversation or conformity orientation was the focal independent variable, while the other FCP orientation was a control variable. Models were run once with direct strategies of support seeking as the dependent variable and once with indirect strategies of support seeking as the dependent variable.

and motivation to seek support mediate the association between FCPs and strategies of support seeking. Put differently, conversation and conformity orientations might influence direct (or indirect) support-seeking behaviors because of the impact they exert on people's general ability and/or motivation as communicators. More so than measures of support seeking that focus on the amount or types of support people desire (see Norberg et al., 2006; Xu & Burleson, 2001), we assert that people's FCPs indirectly influence *how* people seek support (see Figure 1).

Testing mediation in this way answers the calls of researchers who suggest that examining how and why supportive behavior occurs are important questions that rarely receive research attention (see MacGeorge, 2009). Ledbetter (2009) also reported that personal qualities or behaviors mediate the influence of FCPs on outcomes. For example, he noted that FCPs are indirectly associated with relational closeness through their effects on relational maintenance behaviors. Consistent with research documenting indirect effects of FCPs, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5: The association between strength of conversation orientation and direct support seeking is mediated by (a) communicative ability and (b) motivation to seek support, and the association between strength of conversation orientation and indirect support seeking is mediated by (c) communicative ability, and (d) motivation to seek support.

H6: The associations between strength of conformity orientation and (a) direct support seeking and (b) indirect support seeking are mediated by communicative ability.

As evidenced by RQ1, the existence of an association between conformity orientation and motivation to seek support is more tenuous than the association between

conversation orientation and motivation. To be consistent with this logic, we offer the following research question to explore the indirect effects among conformity orientation, motivation to seek support, and strategies of support seeking:

RQ2: Are there associations between strength of conformity orientation and (a) direct support seeking or (b) indirect support seeking that are mediated by motivation to seek support?

Sex and support seeking

Burleson and Kunkel (2006) claimed that there are consistent behavioral differences in how men and women communicate social support. Like FCPs, these sex differences in supportive communication result from socialization. For example, the skills specialization account posits that men and women undergo distinct processes of socialization that foster skills related to supportiveness among women, while downplaying the same skills among men. Compared to men, women excel in most aspects of providing and evaluating supportive messages (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). Research on supportive message production has documented that women are both more effective and motivated support providers than men (Burleson et al., 2011). Likewise, women possess more ability and motivation than men to process supportive messages (Burleson et al., 2011). Women also maintain stronger preferences for direct, involving forms of support than do men (High & Solomon, 2014).

Although less is known about sex differences in support seeking, some scholars contend that women are more likely to seek support than men are (e.g., Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003; Burleson & Kunkel, 2006). Social skill is positively associated with support seeking, and women typically possess more social skill than men, especially in supportive contexts (Mortenson, 2009). Although men might desire help, norms of gendered communication often impel them to internalize problems and eschew help seeking (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Extending this logic, we believe that women are more likely than men to use their ability and motivation to seek support directly, while simultaneously avoiding indirect support seeking. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H7: Sex moderates the influence of ability and motivation on support seeking, such that the positive associations between (a) ability and (b) motivation on direct support seeking are stronger for women than men, and the negative associations between (c) ability and (d) motivation on indirect support seeking are stronger for women than men.

Positing that the associations between ability, motivation, and strategies of support seeking are moderated by sex leads us to question whether the previously described indirect effects are also influenced by sex. Stated differently, we can not only examine whether FCPs exert indirect effects on support seeking through people's ability and motivation, but we can also test whether these effects are stronger for women than men. For example, we hypothesized that conversation orientation is indirectly

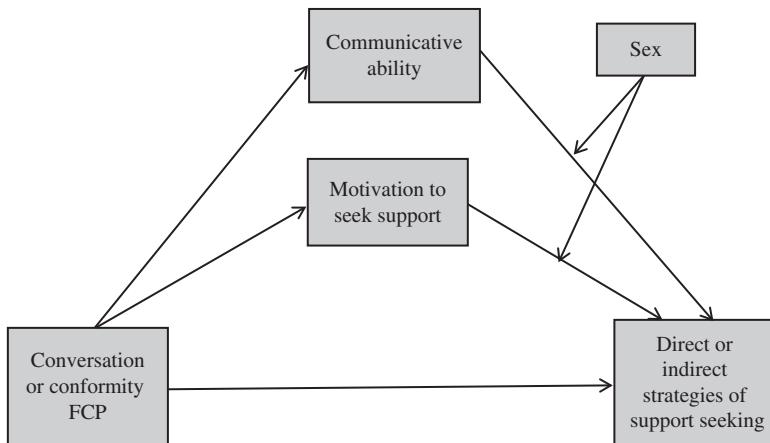


Figure 2 Conceptual diagram of the moderated mediation model used to test H7 and RQ3. Models were run such that either conversation or conformity orientation was the focal independent variable, while the other FCP orientation was a control variable. Models were run once with direct strategies of support seeking as the dependent variable and once with indirect strategies of support seeking as the dependent variable.

associated with direct support seeking through motivation to seek support, and if this effect is stronger for women than men, we have evidence that the indirect effect is moderated. That is, we might have moderated mediation (see Figure 2). Thus, we offer the following research question:

RQ3: Are the indirect effects between family communication patterns and support seeking via (a) communicative ability and (b) motivation to seek support moderated by participant sex?

Methods

Participants and procedure

The sample ($N = 352$) was composed of students (58.8% female) enrolled in undergraduate communication studies courses at a large university in the Midwestern United States. The participants ranged from 18 to 52 years old ($M = 20.77$, $SD = 2.43$) and received extra credit for their participation. The majority of the sample was white (82.7%), but it also included people who self-identified as Asian (5.7%), Hispanic (5.1%), Black (4.0%), and Other (2.5%).

Participants completed an online survey that asked them to recall a time when they sought support for a personal problem. To enhance recall, participants were asked to describe the nature of the problem, rate its severity, and provide the initials of the person from whom they sought support. Commonly discussed problems included relational conflict, family health issues, poor academic performance, depression, and trouble with the law. The severity of the topics was scored on a 100-point scale, and

overall, participants recalled fairly severe topics ($M = 63.93$, $SD = 50.90$, Mode = 70, Range = 5–100).

FCPs are theorized to influence communication with many conversation partners. Because of this, and to maintain ecological validity, we asked participants to identify the support providers they approached, and the most commonly selected support providers were mothers, best friends, and significant others. The communication patterns people encounter within their family are thought to be pervasive and create dispositional qualities, which people then apply to particular interaction episodes (Koerner & Cvancara, 2002). To capture this pattern of influence, we operationalized communicative ability and motivation to seek support at a global level to see how these qualities correspond with a specific instance of support seeking.

Measures

All variables in this study were measured using 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = *Strongly disagree/Didn't seek at all*; 5 = *Strongly agree/Sought a great deal*).

Family communication patterns

Participants completed the 26-item RFCP instrument (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Of the items, 15 measured conversation orientation (e.g., “My parents often ask my opinion when the family is talking about something”) and 11 assessed conformity orientation (e.g., “When anything really important is involved, my parents expect me to obey without question”). We averaged the respective items to create composite conversation orientation ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.85$, $\alpha = 0.93$) and conformity orientation variables ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.79$, $\alpha = 0.86$), where higher scores indicate a stronger orientation to the respective FCP. Conversation and conformity orientation were not significantly correlated ($r = -0.09$, ns).

Communicative ability

We operationalized ability by using Duran’s (1992) 20-item adaptability scale (e.g., “I am relaxed when talking to others”) because of adaptability’s relevance to prior research on FCPs and supportive communication (see Burleson, 2003; Ledbetter, 2009). We averaged these items to create a composite variable where higher scores indicate greater communicative ability ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.58$, $\alpha = 0.90$).

Motivation

We created 5 items to reflect people’s general motivation to seek support when faced with a problem (“I’m highly motivated to seek comfort from other people when I have a problem”; “When I’m feeling bothered, I really want to seek support from family, friends, or other sources”; “When something is bothering me, I have a strong goal of talking to other people about it”; “When I have a problem, I’m highly motivated to get help from others”; “I strongly desire to seek comfort from others when I need it”). We averaged the five items to create a composite variable where higher scores indicate greater motivation to seek support ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.05$, $\alpha = 0.94$).

Support seeking

We used items developed by Barbee and Cunningham (1995; reported in Derlega et al., 2003) to measure participants' recalled strategies of support seeking. Following prior research that used these items in correspondence with a particular interaction (see Derlega et al., 2003), we asked participants to recall how they sought support from the previously identified support provider. To facilitate recall, we asked participants to list the initials of the support provider, and these initials were inserted into each item. Barbee and Cunningham's (1995) scale distinguishes direct and indirect support seeking as well as verbal and nonverbal forms of seeking assistance. Because of prior research documenting the benefits of direct support seeking, we focus on the direct–indirect dimension in this study. Specifically, respondents completed eight items each for direct (e.g., "I asked [Initials] for help with the problem") and indirect (e.g., "I denied the seriousness of the problem") support seeking. Higher scores reflect greater amounts of direct ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.67$, $\alpha = 0.72$) or indirect support seeking ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.83$, $\alpha = 0.79$).

Results

Preliminary analyses

We began by examining correlations among the variables (see Table 1). Conversation orientation exhibited positive associations with communicative ability, motivation, and direct support seeking. Conformity orientation, on the other hand, exhibited a negative association with ability and positive associations with motivation to seek support, and both direct and indirect support seeking. Communicative ability was positively associated with motivation to seek support and direct support seeking, and it was negatively associated with indirect support seeking. Motivation to seek support was positively associated with direct strategies of support seeking. Direct and indirect support seeking were also positively correlated.

Table 1 Correlations Among the Variables in the Study

| Variable | V1 | V2 | V3 | V4 | V5 | V6 |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------|
| V1: Conversation | 0.85 | | | | | |
| V2: Conformity | -0.09 ^a | 0.79 | | | | |
| V3: Ability | 0.30 ^{**b} | -0.12 ^{*b} | 0.58 | | | |
| V4: Motivation | 0.35 ^{**b} | 0.11 ^{*b} | 0.27 ^{**b} | 1.05 | | |
| V5: Direct SS | 0.17 ^{**a} | 0.14 ^{*a} | 0.18 ^{**b} | 0.32 ^{**b} | 0.67 | |
| V6: Indirect SS | -0.02 ^a | 0.25 ^{**a} | -0.18 ^{**b} | -0.09 | 0.36 ^{**c} | 0.83 |

Note. Numbers on the diagonal are standard deviations, and numbers off the diagonal are Pearson correlations. Conversation and conformity represent the respective family communication patterns. Direct SS and Indirect SS signify direct and indirect support seeking, respectively.

^a $N = 334$. ^b $N = 327$. ^c $N = 346$.

^{*} $p < .05$. ^{**} $p < .01$.

We also examined whether the variables differed by respondent sex. Women ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.89$) had a higher conversation orientation than men ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.77$), $t(325) = -2.33$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Results for communicative ability, $t(325) = -3.30$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$, and motivation to seek support, $t(325) = -3.78$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$, also revealed that women were more able communicators (women: $M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.57$; men: $M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.57$) and more motivated to seek support (women: $M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.06$; men: $M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.98$) than men. Lastly, women ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.69$) recalled more direct support seeking than men ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.62$), $t(325) = -3.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$.

Tests of hypotheses and research questions

All analyses were conducted using PROCESS (Hayes, 2009), which produces unstandardized regression weights as estimates of direct effects. The tests for hypotheses assume one-tailed tests, and the analyses for the research questions assume two-tailed tests. We employed 10,000 bootstrapped samples to generate estimates of the indirect effects, standard errors of these estimates, and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals surrounding these effects, which were used as estimates of statistical significance. Simulation studies have reported that bootstrapping procedures generate more accurate Type I error rates and have greater power than alternative procedures, such as the Sobel test (MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007). We ran our analyses twice, once with direct and once with indirect support seeking as the dependent variable. For all analyses in which conversation orientation was the focal independent variable, conformity orientation was included as a covariate, and vice versa.

Our first hypothesis predicted that communicative ability is positively associated with direct and negatively associated with indirect support seeking. In accordance with these predictions, ability was positively associated with direct ($b = 0.13$, $\beta = .11$, $p < .05$) and negatively associated with indirect support seeking ($b = -0.21$, $\beta = -.15$, $p < .01$). These results support H1.

As predicted by H2, motivation was positively associated with direct support seeking ($b = 0.16$, $\beta = .26$, $p < .001$) and negatively associated with indirect support seeking ($b = -0.09$, $\beta = -.14$, $p < .05$).

H3 asserted that conversation orientation is positively associated with ability and motivation to seek support. Consistent with these predictions, people's conversation orientation was positively and significantly associated with communicative ability ($b = 0.20$, $\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) and motivation to seek support ($b = 0.44$, $\beta = .36$, $p < .001$). Thus, H3 was supported.

H4 posited that conformity orientation corresponds negatively with communicative ability, and this prediction was confirmed ($b = -0.09$, $\beta = -.12$, $p < .05$). RQ1 questioned whether there was an association between conformity orientation and motivation to seek support, and we observed a positive association between these variables ($b = 0.18$, $\beta = .13$, $p < .01$). Thus, H4 was supported and we can answer RQ1 by noting the positive association between conformity orientation and motivation to seek support.

H5 predicted that the influence of conversation orientation on support seeking is mediated by people's communicative ability and motivation to seek support. In support of H5a, the indirect effect of conversation orientation on direct support seeking through ability was statistically significant ($b = 0.03$, $\beta = .03$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.08]). In support of H5b, the indirect effect of conversation orientation on direct support seeking through motivation was positive and significant ($b = 0.07$, $\beta = .09$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.15]). In other words, a strong conversation orientation produces more direct support seeking because of the ability and motivation that FCPs grant individuals.

In support of H5c, we observed a negative indirect effect from conversation orientation to indirect support seeking via ability ($b = -0.04$, $\beta = -.04$, 95% CI [-0.09, -0.01]). That is, a strong conversation orientation reduces people's use of indirect support seeking because of their ability as communicators. Lastly, the indirect effect from conversation orientation through motivation to indirect support seeking was not significant ($b = -0.04$, $\beta = -.04$, ns). These results largely support H5.

H6 asserted the existence of indirect effects between conformity orientation and support seeking via communicative ability. The indirect effects from conformity orientation through ability to both direct support seeking ($b = -0.01$, $\beta = -.01$, ns) and indirect support seeking ($b = 0.02$, $\beta = .01$, ns) were not statistically significant. Thus, H6 was not supported.

RQ2 questioned whether conformity orientation was indirectly associated with support seeking because of its influence on people's motivation to seek support. We found a positive indirect effect between conformity orientation and direct support seeking through motivation ($b = 0.03$, $\beta = .04$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.07]). This finding indicates that people who are socialized into a strong conformity orientation seek support directly due to an increased motivation to seek support. In contrast, the association between conformity orientation and indirect support seeking through motivation was not significant ($b = -0.01$, $\beta = -.01$, ns). Overall, these results indicate that conformity orientation only exerts an indirect effect on direct support seeking via people's motivation to seek support.

H7 asserted that sex moderates the associations between ability and motivation and support-seeking behavior. Of all the possible interactions between ability or motivation and sex on support seeking, we observed an interaction between motivation and sex on indirect support seeking ($b = -0.19$, $\beta = -.23$, $p < .05$). Unpacking this interaction revealed a negative association between motivation to seek support and indirect support seeking for women ($b = -0.15$, $\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$), but not men ($b = 0.10$, $\beta = .10$, ns). In other words, a strong motivation to seek support decreased indirect support seeking, but only for women. This interaction provides support for H7d.

RQ3 questioned whether participant sex moderates the indirect effects of FCPs on support seeking. To answer this question, we created moderated-mediation models in which sex moderates the paths between ability and motivation and support seeking behaviors (see Figure 2). We previously noted positive indirect effects between both

conversation and conformity orientations on direct support seeking through motivation. The indirect effect between conversation orientation and direct support seeking through motivation was significant for women ($b = 0.08$, $\beta = .10$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.16]), but not men ($b = 0.04$, $\beta = .05$, ns). This finding suggests that for women, motivation mediates the positive influence of conversation orientation on direct support seeking, but for men it does not.

The indirect effect of conformity orientation on direct support seeking through motivation was positive for both men ($b = 0.02$, $\beta = .02$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.06]) and women ($b = 0.03$, $\beta = .04$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.08]). Motivation to seek support, in other words, helps explain the influence of conformity orientation on direct support seeking for men and women.

In addition, the indirect effect of conversation orientation on indirect support seeking through motivation was significant for women ($b = -0.06$, $\beta = -.06$, 95% CI [-0.13, -0.02]), but not men ($b = 0.01$, $\beta = .02$, ns). Similarly, the indirect effect of conformity orientation on indirect support seeking through motivation was significant for women ($b = -0.03$, $\beta = -.02$, 95% CI [-0.07, -0.01]), but not men ($b = 0.01$, $\beta = .01$, ns). These findings indicate that both conversation and conformity orientations are associated with less indirect support seeking because of women's motivation to seek support. In other words, motivation to seek support is the mechanism through which FCPs reduce indirect support seeking for women. The same effect is not significant for men.

Discussion

Although scholars have compiled decades of research investigating support provision and message evaluation, we know less about what influences a person's support seeking behavior. To bridge this gap in the literature, we focused on FCPs, which are rooted in communication and assert that people learn how to communicate by observing and participating in conversations with their family members. These learned skills and preferences are applicable to many encounters and serve as default behaviors during subsequent interactions.

People whose FCPs afforded them a strong conversation orientation had greater communicative ability and increased motivation to seek support than people with a weaker conversation orientation. A strong conformity orientation was positively associated with motivation to seek support and negatively associated with ability. Similar to support provision and evaluation, people with higher levels of ability and motivation may also engage in more effective support seeking by seeking support directly and avoiding indirect strategies of support seeking.

These patterns of direct effects combined to produce mediation. In particular, a high conversation orientation had a positive indirect effect on direct support seeking through both ability and motivation to seek support. A strong conversation orientation also produced negative indirect effects on indirect support seeking through ability. A high conformity orientation produced positive indirect effects on direct

support seeking via motivation. Several of these indirect effects were significant for women only. Thus, FCPs, particularly a conversation orientation, influence strategies of support seeking because of their associations with people's dispositional levels of ability and motivation to seek support.

Theoretical and practical implications

Despite theoretical interest in linking socialization to supportive communication (Burleson & Kunkel, 2006), scholars have isolated few socializing agents besides parents that influence people's skill, motivation, or experience with support. Many influences (e.g., media, friends, school, etc.) likely help socialize people into particular modes of supportive communication. This study examined one agent of socialization, namely FCPs, which introduce people to the world of interpersonal communication and support seeking, in particular. Whereas a strong conversation orientation positively influenced ability, motivation, and direct support seeking, in addition to decreasing people's use of indirect strategies, a high conformity orientation decreased people's communicative ability. Through its positive effect on motivation, however, a high conformity orientation indirectly increased people's direct support seeking. These findings emphasize the influence of social learning and demonstrate that the way people seek support in particular situations is based, in part, on how their families communicate. People can become more direct support seekers by striving for open conversation orientations in their families. Future researchers can examine the influence of other means of socialization on support seeking.

Scholars have reported that women are more effective support providers and receivers than men (see Burleson et al., 2011; MacGeorge et al., 2011), and our findings suggest that they might also seek support more effectively. Of the effects that were moderated by sex in this study, four were significant for women only, and none were significant for men only. Whereas prior research on sex differences in supportive communication has theorized a skill differential between men and women, the indirect effects in this study were largely produced through motivation. When it comes to support seeking, women might be more motivated than men, and this difference in motivation explains the influence of FCPs on support seeking behavior. Moreover, greater motivation both draws women toward direct strategies and repels them from indirect strategies of support seeking. Thus, rather than emphasizing discrepancies in skill, motivation might be the characteristic that best explains sex differences in seeking supportive communication.

Our findings suggest that children from families that encourage frequent and open communication are both skilled and motivated to seek support directly and to avoid indirect support seeking. One reason for this might be that children from highly conversation-oriented families gain practice talking about both positive and negative events and do not feel discouraged to ask for help (Huang, 1999; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997), perhaps because their requests are often met with support.

Our results also suggested that people from highly conversation-oriented families seek support directly because they are adaptable communicators. These individuals

are socialized to feel aware, calm, and responsive in social situations, and these feelings elicit direct support seeking. Families might consider finding times (e.g., sharing a meal) when they can discuss life events and encourage children to ask for help if they need it. Parents might also model these behaviors and coach their children to instill practices of open communication (see Cupach & Olson, 2006). Doing so might benefit family members' practices of support seeking.

Based on prior research, we were initially unable to hypothesize an association between conformity orientation and motivation to seek support. In response to RQ1, we found that a conformity orientation positively corresponds with motivation. People who belong to strongly conformity-oriented families experience the same or worse stress compared to people from families with lower conformity orientations (Schrodt et al., 2007), yet the strict norms, emphasis on homogeneity, and rigid standards within their families may prevent them from readily accessing support.

Some scholars have compared conformity-oriented families to collectivist cultures (Koerner & Cvancara, 2002), and collectivist cultures downplay social support compared to individualist cultures because they desire to preserve the harmony of the group (Mortenson et al., 2009). People who maintain a strong conformity orientation, then, might be motivated to seek support because they do not often receive support from family members. Given the lack of significant indirect effects between conformity orientation and support seeking, however, it appears that this motivation does not necessarily translate into support seeking behavior. Future research can investigate how people with a strong conformity orientation might transfer their motivation into effective support seeking behaviors.

Our results also uncovered a negative association between conformity orientation and communicative ability. People who mature in a conformity-oriented family might desire support and be motivated to seek it, but they lack the requisite skills. Highly conformity-oriented families stress harmony and conflict avoidance (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006); therefore, members might be motivated to mitigate problems personally, especially those problems that result in family disruption. This behavior might be harmful in the long term because people risk taxing their personal resources if they do not seek support from others. Although it might not be normative, people in families with a high conformity orientation might want to explore different viewpoints or emphasize their individuality during conversation. Doing so might enhance their communicative ability or support seeking behavior. Overall, this first attempt to integrate FCPs with support seeking suggests that families should privilege open conversation with little restriction on the expression of thoughts and feelings. These behaviors produce more effective communicators and privilege direct support seeking.

This study was premised on the benefits of direct, explicit communication in a variety of contexts, support seeking in particular; however, direct support seeking might also produce negative consequences. Goldsmith (2004), for example, discussed the face threat associated with directly seeking support. Some forms of indirect

support seeking might be more comfortable for support seekers to enact. Along these lines, scholars have described ambiguous approach as a means of seeking support via equivocal or off-record messages, and this strategy might be most effective when support seekers face conflicting goals or multiple demands (Goldsmith, 1995). Our procedures asked participants to consider a time when they sought support for a personal problem, thereby triggering intentional, goal-directed episodes of support seeking. Although many instances of support seeking are goal-directed, people might communicate in ways that elicit supportive reactions from others without having that intention. Such messages might be an understudied, yet productive means of accessing support.

We would also note that several of the effects reported in this study are fairly small. That is, factors besides FCPs, communicative ability, and motivation to seek support influence people's chosen strategies of support seeking. For example, a seeker's relationship with a support provider likely influences how directly he or she seeks support from that individual (see Mortenson, 2009). Several other personal qualities, including people's expressivity, attachment style, or perceived support availability, might also influence support seeking behavior. Contextual features of an conversation, including the nature of a stressor or the communication channel used for the interaction, might also influence an individual's style of support seeking. The way people seek support is likely determined by a constellation of factors, only a few of which were examined in this study.

Limitations and conclusion

The results of this study cannot be generalized without considering their limitations. First, we used self-report variables for our analyses, and our procedures were based on participants' recollections. Although we instructed participants to recall a specific instance in which they sought support, we cannot be sure that people's memories match their behavior in particular situations (see Benoit, Benoit, & Wilkie, 1996). This study focused on the direct–indirect dimension of support seeking; however, Barbee and Cunningham (1995) also theorized a verbal-nonverbal dimension. Future research can unpack the associations among socialization, personal qualities, and verbal or nonverbal support seeking. The self-report variable we created to assess motivation to seek support might also be more focused on certain types of support (i.e., comfort or emotional support) than other types of support, such as advice or tangible support. Future studies can examine the correspondence between this variable and people's desires for different types of support.

Another limitation involves our use of cross-sectional data, which constrains our ability to establish causation among our variables. The items in the RFCP instrument focus on people's maturation in a particular family environment, and our measures of communicative ability and motivation assessed dispositional qualities. The support seeking questions, in contrast, focused on a particular interaction; therefore, we are consistent with theory that asserts that FCPs produce general communicative ability and motivation, which, in turn, influence specific interactions.

Although seeking support has the potential to shape the outcomes of supportive interactions, this “first act” in the process of supportive communication has received comparatively little research attention. We found that people’s communicative ability and motivation to seek support guide them toward direct means of seeking support and away from indirect strategies. We also considered how people might gain the ability and motivation needed to seek support, and did so by integrating research on FCPs. This is one of the first studies to document the specific means of socialization (i.e., family communication) through which people gain the ability or motivation to seek support. Thoroughly examining direct and indirect effects on support seeking behavior enables scholars to understand the antecedents and mechanisms by which people initiate the process of supportive communication.

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