

# The Myth of Gender Cultures: Similarities Outweigh Differences in Men's and Women's Provision of and Responses to Supportive Communication

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Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubinfeld (2003) recently reported studies of gender differences in “troubles talk” that allegedly provide support for the *different cultures thesis*, that is, the notion that men and women communicate in such different ways that they should be regarded as members of different communication cultures or speech communities. In this article, we identify several limitations in these two studies that, collectively, have the effect of casting doubt on their conclusions. We then report three studies that show that men and women provide and respond to supportive messages (“troubles talk”) in ways that are much more similar than different. The current findings, in conjunction with other recent findings, suggest that the different cultures thesis is a myth that should be discarded.

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Readers of this journal are certainly familiar with the claim that men and women are so different that they comprise strikingly different “speech communities” (Wood, 2002) or “communication cultures” (Maltz &orker, 1982). Many best-selling books aimed at the general public have propounded this “different cultures” thesis in recent years, including works by John Gray (1992), Deborah Tannen (1990), and others (e.g., Schloff & Yudkin, 1993).<sup>4</sup> The idea

that men and women belong to different communication cultures has also gained wide acceptance in academic circles. Claims about the deep differences in the ways women and men communicate, and the misunderstandings these differences create, fill professional journals and college textbooks, as well as popular best-sellers:

Men's and women's communication styles are startlingly dissimilar. . . . communication is the most glaring of the differences between the sexes. (DeVito, 2002, p. 84)

Even though the particulars constantly change, the fact of gender cultures will likely persist long into the future—perhaps forever—although in newly elaborated ways. Gender permeates, indeed saturates, discourse in ways that we do not often monitor in our everyday experiences. (Johnson, 2000, p. 112)

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<sup>4</sup>Some have suggested that the different cultures thesis is a fad whose time has passed, so critics of this thesis are beating a dead horse. However, as we were completing the initial draft of this article, an issue of *USA Weekend* featured a cover story by John Gray. Gray (2003) opened his article by claiming: “I’ve built a reputation on the premise that the sexes communicate with each other as if they came from different planets. In the latest teen survey

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conducted by *USA Weekend* [reported as a sidebar in Gray’s article], I think we see proof that we don’t become different over the years, but rather we start out that way” (p. 6). Clearly, the different cultures thesis remains alive and kicking in both popular and academic literatures.

American men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures, having learned to do different things with words in a conversation. (Maltz & Borker, 1982, p. 200)

Boys and girls grow up in what are essentially different cultures, so talk between women and men is cross-cultural communication. (Tannen, 1990, p. 18)

Perhaps the most important consequence of these acquired linguistic differences is misunderstanding in cross-gender communication. Boys and girls (as well as men and women) may share a common vocabulary but use that vocabulary in dissimilar ways. . . . Miscommunication may also occur because of different, culturally based interpretations of a given linguistic behavior. (Mulac, Bradac, & Gibbons, 2001, p. 122)

Much of the misunderstanding that plagues communication between women and men results from the fact that they are typically socialized in discrete speech communities. . . . Numerous studies and reviews of research demonstrate that distinct gender cultures exist and that they differ systematically in some important respects. (Wood, 2000, p. 207)

Husbands and wives, especially in Western societies, come from two different cultures with different learned behaviors and communication styles. They are "intimate strangers" with the potential for many gendered misunderstandings. (Bruess & Pearson, 1996, p. 60)

Although the different cultures thesis has been prominent in both academic and popular literatures for more than two decades, not until quite recently have there been studies that claim to find support for hypotheses derived from it (e.g., Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003; Michaud & Warner, 1997). In this article, we offer a critical appraisal of this research and identify limitations in these studies that call their conclusions into question. Then, to evaluate the different cultures thesis further, we report the results of three studies designed to provide more valid tests of the same hypotheses examined in the research we critique. Our overall aim is to provide a rigorous assessment of the claim that men and women constitute distinct "communication cultures," particularly with regard to their manner of engaging in supportive communication.

### The Different Cultures Thesis

In brief, the different cultures thesis maintains that gender-specific socialization of boys and girls leads to different masculine and feminine speech communities. These communities represent different cultures—people who have different ways of speaking, acting, and interpreting, as well as different values, priorities, and agendas. According to the differ-

ent cultures thesis, masculine and feminine modes of thinking, speaking, and interpreting represent *stylistic* differences, not functional differences; each community is held to develop its own characteristic style of addressing communication goals. Different styles are assumed to be equally valid and functionally equivalent; that is, within their respective communities, different styles are assumed to be equally effective at achieving intended outcomes. (For a recent summary and critique of the different cultures thesis, see Kyratzis, 2001).

The different cultures thesis has been elaborated particularly with respect to gender differences in intimacy, emotion, and the disclosure and discussion of emotional upset—what Tannen (1990) and others (e.g., Jefferson, 1988) refer to as "troubles talk." Indeed, some writers have concluded that "caring seems to be the principal category that differentiates one sex from the other" (Bate & Bowker, 1997, p.166; also see Wood, 1994). Proponents of the different cultures thesis maintain that women value close relationships for their emotional and expressive qualities, whereas men chiefly value close relationships for their instrumental features. According to this perspective, girls are taught that talk is the primary vehicle through which intimacy and connectedness are created and maintained (Maltz & Borker, 1982), and thus come to value and enact forms of supportive communication that explicitly validate and explore a distressed person's feelings (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1997b). Boys, on the other hand, are socialized to view talk as a mechanism for getting things done, accomplishing instrumental tasks, conveying information, and maintaining status and autonomy (Wood & Inman, 1993), and thus come to value and enact forms of supportive communication that avoid the discussion of feelings and focus on either fixing the problematic situation or directing attention away from it.

According to the different cultures view, each gender prefers its community's own unique style of expressing and communicating about emotion. Women allegedly perceive men's comforting efforts as dismissive or belittling when, in fact, men are trying to provide support in a way that is respectful and non-assuming (see Wood, 1997b). Men allegedly perceive the emotional support offered by women as demeaning or self-focused when, in fact, women are trying to express understanding and sympathy. Because members of each gender culture supposedly prefer their own stylized ways of providing support, they should prefer members of their own culture as support agents (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1997b).

The different cultures thesis has serious implications for theory, research, and various forms of practice (e.g., counseling, pedagogy). Theoretically, the different cultures thesis implies that what makes messages more and less effective with respect to certain outcomes is purely a matter of convention. That is, messages have particular effects because, within a specific community, certain message forms become conventionally associated with a given effect (see Searle, 1969).<sup>5</sup> This contrasts with the view that messages have certain effects because of how their features operate on the underlying psychological processes of their recipients. Further, because the different cultures thesis maintains that men and women feel, communicate, and relate differently, it implies that distinct theories of emotion, communication, and personal relationships need to be developed for each sex. Consistent with these theoretical implications, proponents of the different cultures thesis (e.g., Cancian, 1986; Swain, 1989; Wood & Inman, 1993) argue that much research on close relationships is methodologically flawed for inappropriately using “feminine yardsticks” in assessments of intimacy, closeness, and emotional support; such flawed research allegedly fails to consider or assess culturally distinct masculine styles of expressing closeness and care. The pragmatic implications that follow from the different cultures thesis are just as far reaching as its theoretical and methodological consequences. The remedy for the “cross-cultural” misunderstandings that plague communication between men and women is to increase “multicultural” awareness and sensitivity. Educators are encouraged by proponents of the different cultures perspective to develop programs that foster “multicultural awareness” of stylistically different, but functionally equivalent, approaches to communication events such as “troubles talk” (see Wood, 1993).

### Evidence Relevant to the Different Cultures Thesis

Despite its profound theoretical, methodological, and practical implications, little systematic evidence that supports the different cultures thesis has been reported. To date, most of the evidence offered in support of the different cultures thesis has been

<sup>5</sup>The different cultures analysis of message effects is problematic, in part, because it mistakes criteria relevant to the identification of a speaker’s intention (e.g., the desire to comfort) with criteria relevant to judging the effectiveness of the strategy used to pursue a goal (e.g., distinguishing messages based on their success at helping someone feel better).

qualitative or anecdotal (e.g., Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990). Such data can be useful in suggesting the structure and meaning of discursive practices in the specific contexts in which they occur, and may imply hypotheses to be evaluated in subsequent research. However, such data are not appropriate for *testing* hypotheses or evaluating research questions, especially when those hypotheses or questions take the form of empirical generalizations regarding the frequencies, patterns, or distributions of behavior for particular groups (Jackson, 1986).

When assessed by standards appropriate to empirical generalizations concerning how men and women typically, usually, or frequently communicate, there are serious problems in the evidence used by many advocates of the different cultures thesis. For example, Goldsmith and Fulfs (1999) developed a detailed critique of Tannen’s (1990) claims regarding gender differences in communication; these authors concluded that virtually none of the empirical generalizations forwarded by Tannen were evidenced adequately. Thorne (1993) and Kyratzis (2001) have carefully critiqued the largely qualitative research summarized by Maltz and Borker (1982), as well as the often uncritical citation of their classic paper. Similarly, Burleson (1997) and Vangelisti (1997) pointed to deficiencies in much of the evidence Wood cited in her influential articles (e.g., Wood, 1993, 1997a) and textbooks (e.g., Wood, 1997b, 2000).

Extensive survey and experimental evidence indicates that, contrary to the different cultures thesis, gender differences in communication, especially supportive communication, are relatively small in magnitude<sup>6</sup> (see reviews by Aries, 1996; Canary &

<sup>6</sup>A reasonable question is: “How big a difference does there need to be between groups to be indicative of a ‘cultural’ difference?” Although any answer to this question necessarily contains an arbitrary element, the question remains an important one. Some “conservatives” might insist (as does Thorne, 1993) that a cultural difference is a *dichotomous* difference, in which case there has to be a near-complete separation of the group distributions on relevant variables. To achieve a nonoverlap in distributions of 95% or more (an arbitrary figure comfortably familiar to most social scientists), a standardized mean difference ( $d$ ) of at least 3.33 must be observed (this corresponds to an  $r^2$  or  $\eta^2$  of .735). Though appealing to some, the criterion of near complete nonoverlap will be viewed as too stringent by others, especially as a standard for distinguishing *subcultures* (which presumably share more commonalities than do distinct cultures). Hence, we propose a more liberal standard for distinguishing cultures (or subcultures). We suggest that the degree of nonoverlap in group distributions should exceed the degree of overlap on relevant variables (i.e., that Cohen’s  $U > .50$ ). This corresponds to a standardized mean difference of  $d > 0.87$  (and to  $r^2$  or  $\eta^2 > .16$ ). This appears to be a reasonable

Emmers-Sommer, 1997; Canary & Hause, 1993; Goldsmith & Dun, 1997; Goldsmith & Fulfs, 1999). Moreover, some of this survey and experimental evidence strongly suggests that the gender differences that do exist in supportive communication are better interpreted as a matter of skillfulness than as a matter of communication style (see Kunkel & Burleson, 1998, 1999; MacGeorge, Clark, & Gillihan, 2002; MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003; Oxley, Dzindolet, & Miller, 2002).

### Two Recent Empirical Tests of the Different Cultures Thesis

Although the results of most survey and experimental studies of gender differences in supportive communication are inconsistent with the different cultures thesis, two recent studies that employed quantitative analyses of survey data claimed to find support for hypotheses deduced from Tannen's (1990) analysis of gender differences in "troubles talk." Michaud and Warner (1997) developed the Communication Styles Survey (CSS) "to assess whether [its] survey methodology would find differences between men and women in their behavioral and emotional responses to troubles talk, comparable to the differences that have been reported in studies that involve discourse analysis and direct observation of marital interaction" (p. 535). Michaud and Warner derived the hypotheses for their study directly from Tannen (1990):

Summarizing Tannen's description of gender difference in the *frequency of use* of communication styles, it appears that men are more likely than women to respond to troubles talk by giving advice, joking, changing the subject, or giving no response. Women are more likely than men to respond to troubles talk by sharing a similar problem or expressing sympathy. Summarizing her description of the *emotional or evaluative responses to communication styles*: she suggested that when they receive sympathy, women feel more comforted and closer to their partners than men; men who receive sympathy tend to feel more angry or put down. According to Tannen, neither men nor women evaluate advice giving very positively, but her examples suggest that men are more likely to feel "put down" by receiving advice than women. (pp. 528–529, emphases in original)

critterion; if there is not at least this much separation in the two distributions, it is hard to see how a claim of "cultural" (or even subcultural) difference can be maintained. Obviously, a separation of this (or any other magnitude does not necessarily mean that) there *are* distinguishable cultural (or subcultural) groups; that is always a conceptual decision that must be informed by theoretical as well as measurement considerations.

To assess gender differences in the *use* of communication styles (i.e., the *provision* of support), the CSS presents participants with six "troubles talk" situations (e.g., "A friend tells you that he/she may be failing a course"). For each situation, participants are asked to rate the likelihood of using six different communication strategies (tell a joke, give advice, express sympathy, change the subject, talk about a similar problem, and tell the other not to worry); these six strategies correspond to those described by Tannen (1990). To assess gender differences in *evaluations* of communication styles (i.e., *responses* to supportive messages), the CSS has participants consider three situations in which they describe an upsetting event to a friend and the friend responds by giving advice or expressing sympathy (e.g., "You tell a friend that you may break up with your dating partner. Your friend [tells you a way to solve this problem] [gives you sympathy]"). Participants then rate how intensely they would experience each of seven emotional responses to the friend's offer of advice or expression of sympathy (i.e., feel comforted, grateful, angry, hurt, put down, helped, and close to the friend).

Using the CSS with a sample of 145 men and 239 women, Michaud and Warner (1997) found statistically significant gender differences for three of six message strategies used to provide support: Men were significantly more likely than women to discourage worry and to change the subject, whereas women were significantly more likely than men to express sympathy. Further, significant gender differences were found for all seven emotional responses to advice: Men reported more negative emotional responses to advice than women did (feeling more angry, hurt, and put down), and women reported more positive emotional responses to advice than men did (feeling more comforted, grateful, helped, and close to the friend). In addition, significant gender differences were found for three of seven emotional responses to sympathy: Men felt more "put down" by sympathy than did women, whereas women felt more comforted by sympathy and closer to the helping friend. Michaud and Warner concluded that "many statistically significant differences were found in this study, and all were in the direction predicted by Tannen's work" (p. 537). However, these researchers also noted that "the effect sizes were very small, even for the differences that were statistically significant," and thus "there is very substantial overlap in the behaviors of men and women" (p. 538).

Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) interpreted Michaud and Warner's (1997) results as "generally

support[ing] Tannen's theory that men and women come from two different cultures of communication" (p. 183). These researchers sought to replicate and extend previous findings by having 58 men and 107 women complete the CSS; participants also completed Bem's (1974) Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) to allow an assessment of the effects of gender role orientation on the provision of and response to supportive messages. Basow and Rubenfeld replicated most of Michaud and Warner's results for gender differences in the provision of support, finding that men indicated a greater likelihood of changing the subject than did women, whereas women reported a greater likelihood of expressing sympathy than did men. Consistent with these results, femininity was positively associated with the reported likelihood of offering sympathy and negatively associated with the reported likelihood of changing the subject; masculinity was negatively associated with the reported likelihood of offering sympathy. However, Basow and Rubenfeld found *no* gender differences in emotional responses to advice or sympathy, perhaps because of the lower statistical power of their design ( $N=384$  for Michaud and Warner vs.  $N=165$  for Basow and Rubenfeld). Basow and Rubenfeld did find that femininity was associated with emotional responses to receiving advice and sympathy.

The authors of these studies maintain that their results provide substantial support for Tannen's (1990) claims about gender differences in troubles talk, and the different cultures thesis more generally. In particular, Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) contended that their "results support the idea that men and women may grow up in two different communication cultures" (p. 186). However, we believe that the studies by Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) exhibit several limitations in methodology, analysis, and interpretation.

### Limitations in the Analyses and Interpretations of Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003)

There is a growing appreciation (Aries, 1996; Burleson, Kunkel, Samter, & Werking, 1996; Canary & Hause, 1993; Hyde & Plant, 1995; Kyratzis, 2001; Thorne, 1993; Wood & Dindia, 1998) that much research on gender differences (especially with respect to social behavior) suffers from two related limitations: (a) the use of research designs that assess group differences but ignore group similarities, and (b) the report of statistical analyses that focus on the reliability (i.e., significance) of gender effects but ignore the magnitude of these effects. Research with these limitations often suggests—inappropriately—that men and women are categorically different with respect to some variable (which, of course, is just what the different cultures thesis implies). The studies by Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) exhibit these two design limitations and, as a result, lead to unwarranted conclusions.

### Provision of Supportive Messages

Table I summarizes the means reported by Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) for assessments of participants' likelihood of using different strategies to support a distressed peer. Table I also includes effect size indicators reported by Michaud and Warner ( $\eta^2$ ), as well as the  $U$  statistic recommended by Cohen (1988);  $U$  provides a measure of nonoverlap in distributions. Basow and Rubenfeld did not report effect sizes for all the gender differences in their study, but did report standard deviations, so we used this information to calculate effect size estimates; these are also reported in Table I. The means for both studies are displayed graphically

**Table I.** Mean Likelihood-of-Use Ratings for Supportive Message Strategies Reported by Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) With Effect Size Indicators

Message type	Michaud and Warner				Basow and Rubenfeld			
	Men	Women	$\eta^2$	$U^a$	Men	Women	$\eta^2$	$U^a$
Change the subject	1.93	1.50	.12	39.52%	1.95	1.56	.09	38.87%
Joke; Cheer up	3.02	2.83	.01	13.46%	3.15	3.20	.00	4.16%
Discourage worry	3.12	2.89	.02	17.58%	3.13	3.11	.00	1.87%
Share a similar problem	3.30	3.16	.01	13.31%	3.20	3.38	.02	17.98%
Give advice	3.40	3.47	.00	6.81%	3.91	4.00	.01	11.19%
Express sympathy	3.40	3.83	.07	35.59%	3.88	4.25	.09	39.77%

<sup>a</sup> $U$  is the degree of nonoverlap in the distributions for men and women.

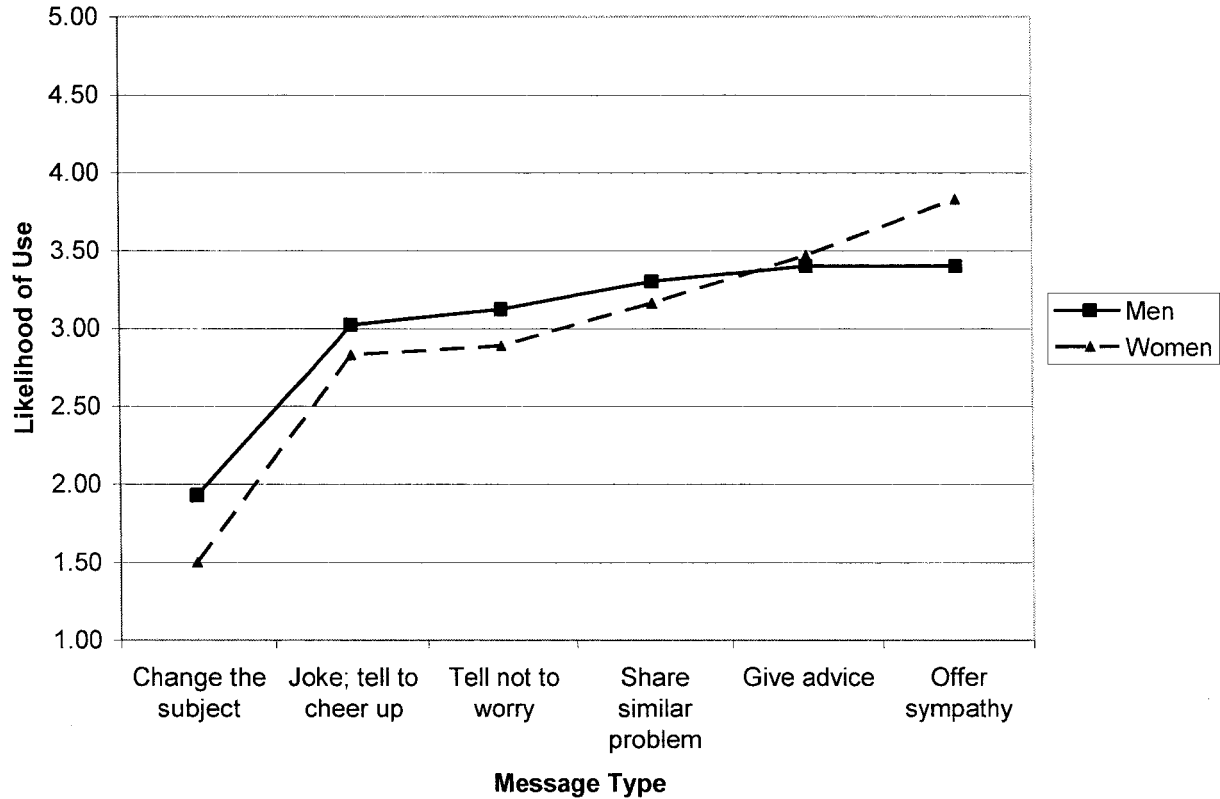


Fig. 1. Mean likelihood-of-use ratings for support messages reported by Michaud and Warner (1997).

in Fig. 1 (Michaud & Warner, 1997) and Fig. 2 (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003).

Figs. 1 and 2 make it clear that the major source of variation in participants' likelihood of use ratings was not biological sex, but rather was type of message strategy. That is, although men reported in both studies that they were somewhat more likely than women to change the subject, and women reported in both studies that they were somewhat more likely than men to express sympathy, both men and women indicated that they were *much* more likely to express sympathy than to change the subject. The degree of overall similarity in men's and women's likelihood-of-use ratings is made evident by correlating the mean use ratings for each strategy (i.e., treating sex as a variable and strategy type as "subject"). This correlation is  $r = .97$  for the Michaud and Warner data and  $r = .99$  for the Basow and Rubenfeld data. The similarity in men's and women's ratings is not apparent in the statistical analyses reported by either Michaud and Warner or Basow and Rubenfeld because they did not include type of message strategy as a factor in their design; both assessed only between-group differences

for each of the six message strategies. Given this degree of similarity, it is difficult to see how these data support the claim that men and women constitute different communication cultures.

#### Responses to Supportive Messages

Basow and Rubenfeld found no gender differences in emotional responses to advice or to sympathy (and did not report cell means for these variables). Michaud and Warner found significant gender differences for all seven emotional responses to advice, and further found significant sex differences for three of seven emotional responses to sympathy. A plot of the means reported by Michaud and Warner for the seven emotional responses to advice and sympathy is presented in Fig. 3. Inspection of this figure makes it apparent that the largest source of variation in emotional responses was not sex of the participants, or even type of message (advice vs. sympathy), but rather was type of emotion (i.e., affect valence). Both men and women reported feeling substantially higher

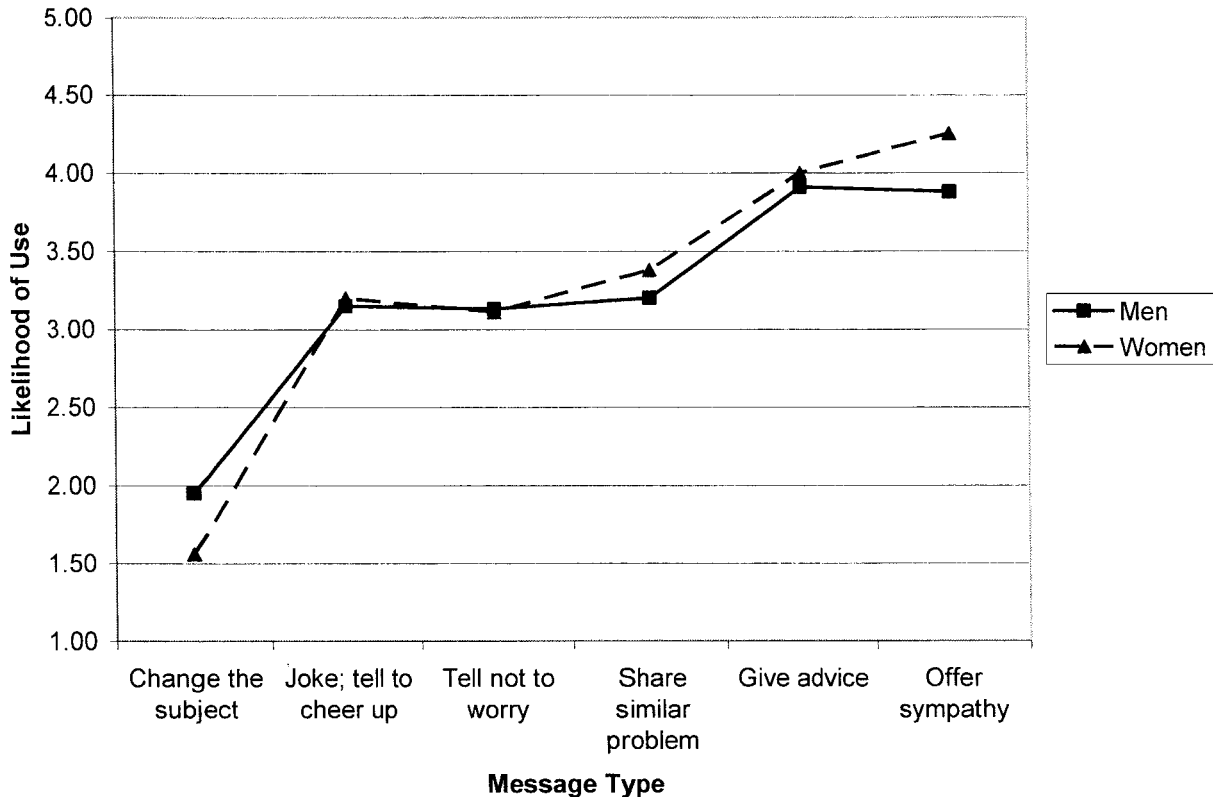


Fig. 2. Mean likelihood-of-use ratings for support messages reported by Basow and Rubenfeld (2003).

levels of negative emotions than positive emotions in response to both advice and sympathy. It appears that the second strongest influence on emotional responses was type of message (advice vs. sympathy); gender differences had an even smaller influence.

Unfortunately, the precise contribution of each of these three factors (type of affect, type of message, and participant sex) to emotional responses cannot be determined from the statistical analyses reported by Michaud and Warner because they did not include type of affect or message as factors in their analysis. However, their data indicate that (a) men and women responded emotionally quite similarly both to offers of advice and to expressions of sympathy, and (b) gender differences were very small and occurred within larger patterns of similarity. The average effect size for participant sex in emotional responses to advice was  $d = 0.32$ , and for sympathy was  $d = 0.20$ ; these differences correspond to nonoverlap indexes ( $U$ ) of 22.6 and 14.8% for advice and sympathy, respectively. Once more, it is difficult to see how these data support the claim that men and women represent two distinct communication cultures.

### Methodological Limitations in the Communication Styles Survey (CSS)

In addition to our concerns about data analysis and interpretation, several features of the instrument employed by Michaud and Warner and Basow and Rubenfeld—the Communication Styles Survey (CSS)—appear to be problematic.

#### *Limitations in the Method of Assessing the Provision of Support*

The CSS has participants rate their likelihood of using abstract messages (e.g., “I would say something sympathetic”). There are two problems with this method of assessing support provision. First, the abstract character of the CSS message response options obscures what participants have in mind when they respond. There are many different things people can say when expressing sympathy, offering advice, trying to change the subject, and so forth. For example, sympathy can be offered with a greater or lesser degree

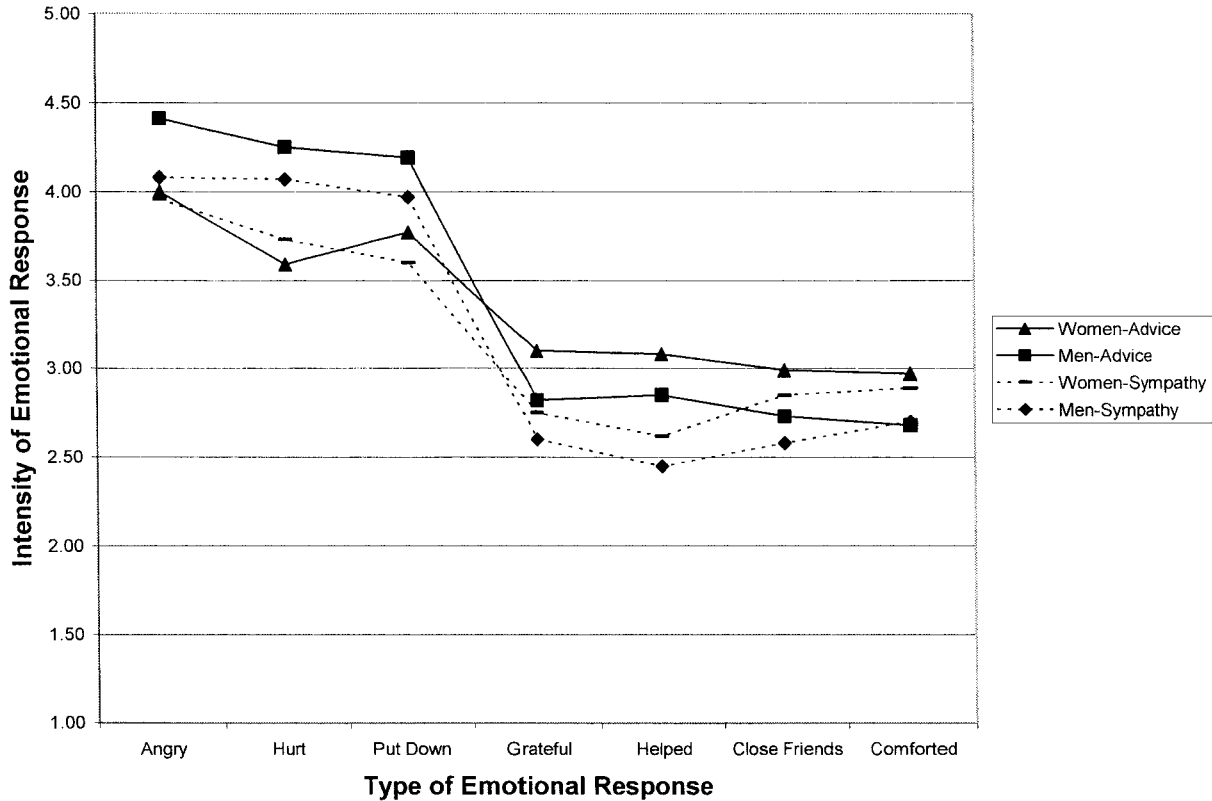


Fig. 3. Intensity of emotional responses to receiving advice and sympathy reported by Michaud and Warner (1997).

of “person-centeredness” (the explicit acknowledgement, elaboration, and exploration of another’s feelings; see Burleson, 1994).

Second, there are grounds for doubting the validity of data based on the “strategy selection procedure,” the method employed by the CSS in which participants rate researcher-supplied messages for likelihood of use. In general, the selection procedure is contaminated by an *item-desirability bias*; that is, the tendency for item ratings to be influenced to an unwarranted extent by the social desirability of the items (Burleson et al., 1988; Edwards, 1957). This bias results in participants overreporting the likelihood of using positive or socially desirable message strategies (such as sympathy) and underreporting the likelihood of using less desirable strategies (such as changing the subject), especially in comparison to data collected through behavioral observation or through the “strategy construction procedure” (in which participants generate their own messages in response to various situations).<sup>7</sup> Consistent with the item-

desirability bias, data obtained through the CSS suggest that both men and women are most likely to use the socially desirable strategy of expressing sympathy and least likely to use the socially undesirable strategy of changing the subject, and thus may *underestimate* the magnitude of gender differences that actually exist in the use of support strategies.

Alternatively, the decisional heuristics that inform participants’ likelihood-of-use ratings (Murphy, Herr, Lockhart, & Maguire, 1986; Waltman & Burleson, 1997) may *exaggerate* the magnitude of gender differences that actually exist in the use of support strategies. In contemporary American society, men and women are *expected* to use different types of support messages, quite apart from whether

port messages that exhibit high levels of sensitivity and compassion; more common are messages that seek to distract the target from the upsetting situation or tell the target how to think, act, and feel (e.g., MacGeorge et al., 2003). Similarly, researchers who observe actual support episodes or obtain retrospective reports about these episodes often find that helpers employ messages that are insensitive and unhelpful (e.g., Dunkel-Schetter, Blasband, Feinstein, & Herbert, 1992; Lehman & Hemphill, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>For example, researchers who employ the strategy construction procedure often find that participants infrequently generate sup-

they actually do so. Indeed, certain support behaviors are viewed (by both men and women) as masculine whereas others are viewed as feminine (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). These gender-based expectations may function as a decisional heuristic for men's and women's likelihood-of-use ratings, and lead members of each sex to endorse the message forms stereotypically associated with their gender and to reject those associated with the other gender. Indeed, Michaud and Warner (1997, p. 538) acknowledge this particular limitation of their method.

In sum, the strategy selection procedure is subject to numerous biases that raise concerns about the validity of data generated by this method. Researchers exploring gender differences in support behaviors, as well as other issues, should thus eschew the selection procedure and employ other, more valid methods of behavioral assessment.

#### *Limitations in the Method of Assessing Responses to Support*

The procedure used by the CSS to assess emotional responses to offers of advice and sympathy may also result in problematic data. In particular, this component of the CSS suffers from having participants respond to descriptions of abstract message categories rather than to concrete message examples. Research on message vividness (e.g., Kopfman, Smith, Ah Yun, & Hodges, 1998) suggests that concrete message exemplars are more likely than abstract category descriptions to generate an affective response, and thus represent a more valid basis for assessing gender differences in emotional responses. Further, because there are many different ways of giving advice and expressing sympathy, assessments of responses to these two message categories should examine how variations in the form of advice and sympathy influence emotional responses, as well as gender differences in emotional responses.

#### **Focus of the Current Studies: Systematic Tests of Predictions Derived From the Different Cultures Thesis**

The limitations in method, analyses, and interpretations in the studies reported by Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) warrant skepticism about their conclusions. The limitations in these studies additionally warrant further in-

vestigation of the hypotheses they examined. In particular, research is needed to evaluate the magnitude of both gender differences and similarities in the provision of and responses to supportive messages. Thus, we report three studies that were designed to evaluate more rigorously the hypotheses that Michaud and Warner and Basow and Rubenfeld derived from Tannen's (1990) work.

Specifically, we conducted studies that assessed gender-related differences and similarities in: messages used to provide emotional support to a distressed friend facing some trouble (Study 1), responses to advice received from others (Study 2), and responses to varied expressions of sympathy (Study 3). In each study, we also examined the influence of gender role orientation (i.e., expressive and instrumental orientations) on the dependent variables. The overall goal of these studies was to assess the degree of similarity and difference in men's and women's provision of, and responses to, supportive messages, and thereby to evaluate more rigorously the merit of the different cultures thesis forwarded by Tannen and others.

#### **STUDY 1: THE PROVISION OF SUPPORT BY MATURE ADULTS: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES AS A FUNCTION OF SEX AND GENDER ROLE ORIENTATION**

##### **Rationale**

Study 1 was conducted to assess Michaud and Warner's (1997) hypothesis (derived from Tannen) that, in the context of *providing* support to distressed others, men and women display substantial differences in the frequencies with which they use various support efforts. Specifically, these researchers predicted that men would be more likely than women to respond to a distressed friend by "giving advice, joking, changing the subject, or giving no response," whereas women would be more likely than men to respond by "sharing a similar problem or expressing sympathy" (Michaud & Warner, 1997, p. 528). In Study 1, we sought to provide a more rigorous assessment of these hypotheses by making improvements in the data collection procedures, the data analysis, and the sample. We also sought to extend the work of Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) by examining associations between gender role orientation and the use of various support strategies; in particular, we examined the extent to which gender role orientation mediated

the effects of sex on the use of different support strategies.

We employed a message generation task to assess the frequency with which men and women use various support efforts when they attempt to assist distressed friends. This task involved presenting participants with several hypothetical, but realistic, situations that depicted an upset friend, asking participants to state what they would say in these situations, recording and then preparing verbatim transcripts of the oral responses, and finally coding the responses using an appropriate set of categories. This data collection task—the strategy construction procedure—is not subject to an item-desirability bias and has been found to be more sensitive than the strategy selection procedure to both individual and situational factors that are believed to influence the use of different message types (see Burleson et al., 1988). Moreover, the strategy construction procedure has been shown in a variety of contexts to generate data consistent with behavioral patterns observed in real-world situations (e.g., Kochanska, Kuczynski, & Radke-Yarrow, 1989). Thus, the strategy construction procedure should provide a more valid assessment of differences (and similarities) in the frequencies with which men and women use various support strategies than Michaud and Warner's (1997) CSS provides.

We also sought to improve on previous research by employing data-analytic techniques that permitted assessments of the extent to which women and men exhibit similarities, as well as differences, in their use of support strategies. Specifically, message type served as a repeated-measures factor in Study 1, thereby permitting estimates of the variation in participant behavior due to gender, message type, and the interaction of these two factors. In addition, to enhance the generalizability of the findings, we employed multiple stimulus situations and included situation as a factor in the design.

Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) found aspects of gender role orientation to be significantly correlated with the likelihood of using certain support strategies. However, these researchers did not report analyses assessing the mediating effect of gender role orientation. Thus, we sought to determine the extent to which gender role orientation mediated gender differences in the use of various support strategies.

Finally, we employed a sample of mature adults in Study 1, in contrast to Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003), who both used samples of college students. Researchers reporting few gender differences in communicative behavior (e.g.,

Burleson et al., 1996) have been criticized (see Wood, 1997a) for employing samples of students, where gender differences may be smaller than those in the broader population for several reasons. First, older individuals underwent primary socialization at a time when gender role norms were less flexible. Second, greater age makes it more likely that individuals have inhabited a highly gendered occupational or familial role (e.g., engineer, mother). And, third, by virtue of their education, contemporary college students are more likely to have been exposed to an ideology of androgyny and gender equality. Our use of a non-college sample of mature adults should thus increase the likelihood of detecting gender differences, should they exist.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 276 adults (134 men and 142 women), ranging in age from 40 to more than 80 years of age (33% were 40–45, 26% were 46–50, 17% were 51–55, 9% were 56–60, 4% were 61–65, 5% were 66–85, and 5% did not report their age). The majority were European American (72%), but African Americans and Asian Americans were also represented (15 and 4%, respectively); 8% of the participants did not provide ethnicity information. Participants reported a range of occupations; income varied correspondingly (2% of households less than \$20,000, 21% between \$20,000 and \$40,000, 15% between \$40,000 and \$60,000, 12% between \$60,000 and \$80,000, and 30% greater than \$80,000; 19% did not report income).

These mature adults were recruited by students enrolled in undergraduate interpersonal communication classes at a large midwestern university. Each of 100 students recruited two men and two women over the age of 40 for the student's use in a class assignment. When they gave informed consent for the student's use of the data, participants also indicated whether they were willing to have their data used in this research. Of the 400 mature adults who provided data for the students' use, 305 (76%) were willing to have their data included in the research. Twenty-nine of these participants were subsequently eliminated due to substantial missing data, which reduced the analyzed sample to 276.

Students arranged a time during which participants could complete the study uninterrupted. At the beginning of the session, participants read and signed

an informed consent statement. Then, they completed a message construction task, a demographic questionnaire, a questionnaire that assessed perceived realism and seriousness of the scenarios used in the message construction task, and a measure of gender role orientation.

### *Demographics*

Participants' sex, age, ethnicity, occupation, and household income were assessed with a brief questionnaire that contained a single item asking about each of these characteristics.

### *Gender Role Orientation*

Assessments of masculinity and femininity were obtained using the original version of Bem's (1974) Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). In this version, 20 items measure self-perceptions of masculine or instrumental traits (e.g., self-reliant, aggressive, willing to take risks), and 20 items assess feminine or expressive qualities (e.g., affectionate, sensitive to the needs of others, gentle); 20 gender-neutral items are also included. Although there are various criticisms of its measurement properties, the BSRI has been judged repeatedly to have adequate validity and reliability as an assessment of self-perceived feminine and masculine traits, and has been used in more than 1,000 studies during the past three decades (see Beere, 1990).

Reliability analysis of the 20 femininity items yielded an alpha of .85, but 6 items had low item-total correlations (less than .30). Four of these items have negative connotations (childlike, flatterable, gullible, shy), and two focused on very specific qualities of behavior (does not use harsh language, soft-spoken). Dropping these six items produced an alpha of .90, so an index of femininity was created from the mean of the remaining 14 items. Reliability analysis of the 20 items for masculinity yielded an alpha of .90 and no item-total correlations less than .30. Accordingly, an index of masculinity was created from the mean of the items.

### *Message Construction Task*

*Elicitation.* Participants read four scenarios that described a same-sex friend as upset about a personal

problem. Participants were instructed to respond to the situations by speaking "as though your friend were actually there in the room with you." These responses were tape-recorded. The four scenarios were written to depict problems relevant to a mature adult population: (a) being asked for a divorce; (b) receiving a poor performance evaluation at work; (c) death of a high-school friend; and (d) having to give a speech to a community group.

After responding to all of the scenarios, participants completed two 7-point Likert-style items that assessed each scenario's realism (realistic-unrealistic, believable-unbelievable) and two items that assessed each scenario's seriousness (serious-not serious, significant-insignificant). For each scenario, responses to the realism items were highly consistent (*alphas* ranged from .82 to .85), as were responses to the seriousness items (*alphas* ranged from .74 to .88). Accordingly, scales for each scenario's realism and seriousness were created from the means of the items. Participants indicated that the scenarios were all relatively serious (means ranged from 4.5 for the speech scenario to 6.4 for the divorce scenario) and realistic (means ranged from 5.4 for the speech scenario to 6.4 for the divorce scenario).

*Transcription and Unitizing.* The students who collected the data provided initial verbatim transcriptions of the participants' messages. These transcripts were then checked for accuracy against the tape recordings and corrected by the first author and undergraduate research assistants. Following procedures detailed by Goldsmith and Dun (1997), participants' transcribed responses for each situation were then unitized into "thought units." In general, thought units are utterances that contain an independent clause of approximate sentence length that represents a complete idea. The first and fourth authors unitized a randomly selected sample of 20% of the transcripts; unitizing reliability for this sample was good (Guetzkow's  $U = .01$ ), so the fourth author unitized all of the remaining transcripts.

*Coding.* The first and fourth authors developed a system for classifying the content of each thought unit. This system was based in part on Goldsmith and Dun's (1997) content-analytic coding system for supportive communication, which distinguishes among messages that focus on (a) the character of the support seeker's problem, (b) emotions expressed in response to the problem, and (c) actions that could be taken to resolve the problem. These three broad categories gave rise to 19 more differentiated subcategories (see Table II for category definitions),

**Table II.** Categories and Reliabilities for the Coding System Used in Study 1**General category 1: *Sympathy***

These units express sympathy, describe or legitimate the problem, describe or legitimate the emotional distress, offer emotional support, or express the emotional response of the support-provider.

Subcategory A: *Describing or legitimating the problem* (intercoder agreement = 87%)

These units describe or evaluate the target's problem and avoid minimization of the problem. They either provide a neutral description of the problem or evaluate the problem in a manner that is consistent with the target's evaluation of the problem (i.e., as something serious and upsetting). *Example:* "And I can only imagine that this is such a horrible thing to have to be going through."

Subcategory B: *Describing or legitimating negative emotion* (intercoder agreement = 91%)

These units describe or evaluate the target's emotional response to the problem and avoid minimization of the emotional state or directives to change it or manage it. *Example:* "And it's always a shock when you don't get what you deserve and you kinda thought that it was gonna happen."

Subcategory C: *Offering emotional support* (intercoder agreement = 100%)

These units indicate that the speaker is willing to engage in the emotional experience or expression of emotion with the target, or that the speaker will offer comforting or emotional support to target. *Example:* "Wells if you need shoulder to cry on, I'm here."

Subcategory D: *Expressing condolence or sorrow* (intercoder agreement = 99%)

These units express the speaker's current emotional reaction to hearing about the target's problem. *Example:* "Gee! Mary, I am very sorry to hear about your friend."

**General category 2: *Advice***

These units advise the support-seeker to take some action, either directly or by indicating what action the support-provider would take if experiencing the problem.

Subcategory A: *Advocating emotion-focused behavior or cognition* (intercoder agreement = 86%)

These units describe or prescribe an action or cognition for target to take with respect to his/her emotional state without (1) negatively evaluating the negative emotion, (2) requiring that the target modify his or her negative feelings, or (3) prescribing the experience of positive emotion. This category also includes units that describe emotion-focused behavior or cognition by the speaker or others.

*Example:* "I do think you need to ask yourself what you're afraid of. How much you really depend on this person."

Subcategory B: *Describing action as a shared solution* (intercoder agreement = 83%)

These units indicate that the speaker or others would take the action if they were experiencing the problem, or have taken the action when they were in a similar problem-situation. *Example:* "I think I would suggest, if it were me, to have a 'trial separation' first to see how that works before you just, you know, go right ahead with the divorce."

Subcategory C: *Prescribing action* (intercoder agreement = 91%)

These units describe or prescribe an action that the target may take in response to his/her problem situation. *Example:* "And what you can do is practice it a few times 'till you get it perfect so when you go up there you'll feel more comfortable and more relaxed and you'll get your point across, whatever you have to say about it."

**General category 3: *Sharing similar problem***

These units describe the problem or emotional distress that results from the problem as something the support-provider has also experienced.

Subcategory A: *Describing the emotion as a shared experience* (intercoder agreement = 92%)

These units describe the target's negative emotion as being shared by the speaker or by others (either in "hypothetical" response to experiencing the target's problem or in actual response to problems they have experienced themselves). *Example:* "When my mom died it took me a long time to get over the fact that she would not be around any more."

Subcategory B: *Describing the problem as a shared experience* (intercoder agreement = 85%)

These units describe the problem as being shared (past, present, or future) by the speaker or by others who are not currently involved in the target's situation. *Example:* "I know I've had this experience where I've had a performance evaluation that was not as high or as successful as I would have liked it to have been."

**General Category 4: *Minimizing the situation***

These units minimize the support-seeker's problem or emotional distress.

Subcategory A: *Minimizing the problem* (intercoder agreement = 92%)

These units have the common characteristic of indicating that the target's problem is not as serious or significant as the target has suggested. *Example:* "You seem to be making it worse than it really is, talking to a group like that."

Subcategory B: *Minimizing negative emotion* (intercoder agreement = 88%)

These units have the general characteristic of downplaying the negative emotion being experienced by the target. These units may indicate that the target's emotion is not as serious or significant as the target believes, state that the situation does not call for the type or extent of emotional response being experienced by the target, or direct the target to change the negative emotional state (either by lessening or eliminating the negative emotion, by substituting a positive emotion, or both). *Example:* "If you didn't want to do something, there's no reason to feel bad that you didn't do it."

**General category 5: *Offering help***

These units extend offers of aid or assistance to the target.

Subcategory A: *Offering joint activity or speaker activity* (intercoder agreement = 97%)

In these units the speaker indicates willingness to engage in interaction or activity with the target, or to engage independently in an activity for the benefit of the target. *Example:* "You know what we can do, we can set up a, write up a speech together—whatever you have to say to the committee."

Table II. (Continued)

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General category 6: <i>Asking questions</i>
These units request information from the target about the situation, feelings, or actions.
Subcategory A: <i>Asking questions about the problem</i> (intercoder agreement = 92%)
These units ask a question about the problem. <i>Example</i> : “Did your boss really, you know really, tell you what you were doing wrong or what the expectations of the job were?”
Subcategory B: <i>Asking questions about emotion</i> (intercoder agreement = 86%)
In these units the speaker asks a question about the target’s emotional experience or expression. <i>Example</i> : “Do you feel like talking about it?”
Subcategory C: <i>Asking questions about action</i> (intercoder agreement = 83%)
In these units the speaker asks questions about the target’s or others’ actions. <i>Example</i> : “Have you talked to your supervisor yet?”
General category 7: <i>Affirming/encouraging</i>
These units express confidence, faith, or belief in the target and/or the target’s ability to cope with the problem situation.
Subcategory A: <i>Affirming capacities and resources for managing the problem</i> (intercoder agreement = 92%)
These units imply that the target has the capacity to cope with the problem, or resources available to cope with the problem. <i>Example</i> : “You’re going to do great!”
Subcategory B: <i>Criticizing or blaming others</i> (intercoder agreement = 100%)
These units assert that someone in the target’s problem-situation has negative qualities and/or has helped to create the problem.
<i>Example</i> : “If he didn’t sit, and really give you some type of clues, or some type of information as to how you could perform better, then I don’t see why he should, you know, have rated your performance so poorly, especially since it meant that it was going to affect your raise.”
General category 8: <i>Assigning blame</i>
These units specify the source of the problem by assigning blame or responsibility for the problem to the target.
Subcategory A: <i>Criticizing or blaming the target</i> (intercoder agreement = 50%)
These units assert that the target is to blame (at fault or responsible) for the problem or some aspect of the problem-situation, or that the target has negative qualities. <i>Example</i> : “You know you had many chances to straighten up in certain areas but you continue not to do so.”

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which were used to code each thought unit in the data. To establish inter-coder reliability, the first and fourth author coded a randomly selected sample of 11.33% of the data (125 messages that contained 1501 thought units). They achieved agreement of 80% or better for 18 of the 19 categories, with an average of 90% agreement across the 19 categories (see Table II for category reliabilities).<sup>8</sup> Disagreements were resolved by discussion, and coding of the remaining messages was completed by the first and fourth authors.

To evaluate the research questions of Study 1 concerning gender differences in the use of supportive message types, 18 of the 19 categories were combined into eight summary categories (we dropped the “unclassifiable” category). Four of these summary categories were created to correspond closely to the items in Michaud and Warner’s CSS. The CSS “express sympathy” items (“I would say something sympathetic”) was represented by our *Sympathy* category, which included thought units that described or legitimated the problem, described or legitimated the emotional distress, offered emotional support,

or expressed the emotional response of the support provider (see Table II). The CSS “give advice” item (“I would tell him/her how to resolve the problem”) was represented by our *Advice* category, which included thought units that either directly advised the support seeker to take some action or indicated an action the support provider would take if he or she experienced the problem. The CSS “share a similar experience” item (“I would tell him/her about a similar problem I have had”) was represented by our *Sharing similar problem* category, which included thought units that described the problem (or emotional distress that resulted from the problem) as something the support provider had experienced. The CSS “discourage worry” item (“I would tell him/her that he/she shouldn’t worry”) was represented by our *Minimize situation* category, which included thought units that sought to minimize the support seeker’s problem or emotional distress.

Two of the CSS items could not be represented in our summary categories: the “change the subject” item (“I would change the subject”), and the “joke” item (“I would tell a joke to cheer him/her up”). The nature of our message construction task prevented participants from changing the subject. Further, there was little evidence of joking in the transcribed messages, so the original 18 categories did not include a

<sup>8</sup>Only two instances of assigning blame were identified in the reliability sample. The low frequency of these units contributed to the low intercoder reliability for this category.

**Table III.** Frequency and Proportion of Message Units in Study 1 as a Function of Participant Sex and Message Type

Message type	Frequency of message use		Proportion of message use	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Assign blame	0.062 (0.209)	0.034 (0.116)	0.007 (0.027)	0.004 (0.016)
Share problem	0.653 (0.978)	0.681 (1.342)	0.048 (0.057)	0.046 (0.060)
Affirm other	0.647 (1.183)	0.766 (0.958)	0.043 <sup>a</sup> (0.058)	0.062 <sup>b</sup> (0.072)
Offer help	1.078 (1.463)	1.199 (1.293)	0.077 <sup>a</sup> (0.087)	0.101 <sup>b</sup> (0.091)
Minimize situation	1.159 (1.157)	0.947 (0.908)	0.111 (0.115)	0.088 (0.096)
Ask questions	1.209 (1.607)	1.442 (1.745)	0.097 (0.125)	0.117 (0.132)
Express sympathy	3.272 (3.219)	3.500 (3.247)	0.248 (0.114)	0.268 (0.111)
Give advice	4.054 (3.281)	3.563 (3.638)	0.337 <sup>a</sup> (0.172)	0.290 <sup>b</sup> (0.162)

Note.  $N = 276$ . For each message type, means with different superscripts differ significantly,  $p < .05$ . Coefficients in parentheses are standard deviations.

classification for jokes.<sup>9</sup> Four additional summary categories were employed to represent types of message behavior present in our data but not captured by the CSS items. These include *Offering help*, *Asking questions*, *Affirming/encouraging the other*, and *Assigning blame* (see Table II).

### Power

With a sample of 134 men and 142 women, and a two-tailed alpha of .05, the power of the present study to detect sex differences was approximately .38 for small effects ( $d = 0.20$ ) and in excess of .99 for medium effects ( $d = 0.50$ ) and large effects ( $d = 0.80$ ).

## Results

### Gender Differences in the Provision of Support

Our major concern in Study 1 was with gender differences in the use of various support messages. Means and standard deviations for the frequency with which men and women used each of the eight message types are reported in Table III. The frequency of message use data were analyzed initially with a 2 (participant sex)  $\times$  4 (stimulus situation)  $\times$  8 (message type) ANOVA; sex was a between-groups factor, and stimulus situation and message type were re-

peated measures. The main effect for sex was not significant,  $F(1, 274) = 0.01$ ,  $p > .98$ ; men ( $M = 12.134$ ) and women ( $M = 12.131$ ) produced virtually the same number of units per stimulus situation. Significant main effects were observed for message type,  $F(7, 1918) = 174.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .39$ , and stimulus situation,  $F(3, 822) = 20.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . As indicated by the means in Table III, participants most frequently gave advice and expressed sympathy; then asked questions, minimized the situation, and offered help; then affirmed the other and shared similar problems; and least frequently assigned blame. As indicated in Table IV, participants produced the largest number of message units when responding to friends who had to give a speech ( $M = 13.72$ ), used a roughly equivalent number of message units when responding to friends who had been asked for a divorce ( $M = 12.52$ ) or who had received poor performance evaluations ( $M = 12.00$ ), and used the least number of message units when responding to friends upset by the death of a high-school friend ( $M = 10.34$ ).

For purposes of this study, the sex  $\times$  message type interaction was critical; however, this interaction was not significant, which indicates that the frequency with which different types of messages were used did not vary as a function of participant sex,  $F(7, 1918) = 1.45$ ,  $p > .17$ ,  $\eta^2 = .005$  (see Table III). However, the two-way interaction between message type and stimulus situation was significant,  $F(21, 5754) = 42.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .13$ . Decomposition of this interaction indicated that the frequencies with which different types of messages were used varied as a function of the stimulus situation. For example, participants more frequently used expressions of sympathy in the "death of a friend" situation than they did in the "give a speech" situation, and more frequently gave advice in the "give speech"

<sup>9</sup>A search of the 1104 transcribed messages for the term "joke" yielded virtually no hits. This is consistent with research on retrospective self-reports of supportive behaviors from mature adults (e.g., Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986; Lehman & Hemphill, 1990). Mature adults may be less likely than college undergraduates to use joking as a way of providing support.

**Table IV.** Frequency of Message Units in Study 1 as a Function of Participant Sex and Stimulus Situation

Stimulus situation	Men	Women	Marginal
Impending divorce	11.57 (11.10)	13.37 (11.04)	12.52 (11.09)
Poor performance appraisal at work	11.96 (10.65)	12.04 (10.04)	12.00 (10.32)
Death of a chum	10.75 (9.40)	9.94 (9.62)	10.34 (9.51)
Must give a speech	14.26 (10.89)	13.18 (9.87)	13.70 (10.37)
Marginal	12.13 (9.32)	12.13 (9.32)	12.13 (9.32)

Note.  $N = 276$ . Coefficients in parentheses are standard deviations.

situation than in the “death of a friend” situation. This two-way interaction was not further qualified by an interaction with sex, and thus is not particularly relevant to the concerns of the present study.<sup>10</sup> More relevant to present concerns, there was a significant interaction between participant sex and stimulus situation,  $F(3, 822) = 4.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . Decomposition of this interaction indicated that women produced longer messages than men when responding to friends who had been asked for a divorce, whereas men produced longer messages than women when responding both to friends who had lost a high-school friend and to friends who had to give a speech; men and women produced messages of equivalent length when responding to friends who had received poor performance appraisals (see Table IV).

Because message length (i.e., frequency of units produced) varied as a function of the interaction between participant sex and stimulus situation, a second set of analyses was conducted on the *proportion* of message types used in the four stimulus situations. Proportions for each of the eight types of messages used in each of the four situations were created by dividing relevant message frequencies by the total number of message units used in responding to each situation. Prior to analysis, these proportions were subjected to an arc-sine transformation; however, for purposes of interpretive clarity, Table III reports the untransformed proportions. The transformed proportions were analyzed initially with a 2 (participant sex)  $\times$  4 (stimulus situation)  $\times$  8 (message type) ANOVA; sex was a between-groups factor, and stimulus situation and message type were repeated measures. Significant main effects were observed for message type,  $F(7, 1869) = 214.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .45$ , and for stimulus situation,  $F(3, 801) = 4.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .015$ . The large main effect for message type resulted from the comparatively high usage of

advice and expressions of sympathy; the moderate use of question asking, minimization, and offers of assistance; the infrequent use of affirming the other and sharing a similar problem; and the quite rare use of blame assignment; see Table III and Fig. 4. The main effect for stimulus situation resulted from a larger number of units coded in the “other” category for the “divorce” situation than for the other three situations.<sup>11</sup>

More important with respect to our concerns in Study 1, there was a significant sex  $\times$  message type interaction for the proportion of message use,  $F(7, 1869) = 2.91$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ . Decomposition of this interaction revealed that women used a greater proportion of messages than men that affirmed the other ( $M_s = .062$  and  $.043$  for women and men, respectively),  $t(274) = 2.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , and offered help ( $M_s = .101$  and  $.077$  for women and men, respectively),  $t(274) = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .018$ . In contrast, men used a greater proportion of messages that gave advice than did women ( $M_s = .337$  and  $.290$  for men and women, respectively),  $t(274) = 2.30$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .019$ . There was also a significant two-way interaction between the factors of message type and stimulus situation,  $F(21, 5607) = 54.85$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .17$ . As with the frequency data, this interaction indicated that that some types of messages were used proportionately more in some situations than others—an effect that, although interesting, is not of focal concern in the present study.<sup>12</sup> No other effects in this analysis were significant.

#### *The Influence of Gender Role Orientation on the Provision of Support*

Our second concern in Study 1 was to determine the extent to which gender role orientation influenced

<sup>10</sup>Details regarding the decomposition of this interaction are available from the first author.

<sup>11</sup>Details regarding the significant main effect for stimulus situation on proportion of message use are available from the first author.

<sup>12</sup>Details regarding the decomposition of this interaction are available from the first author.

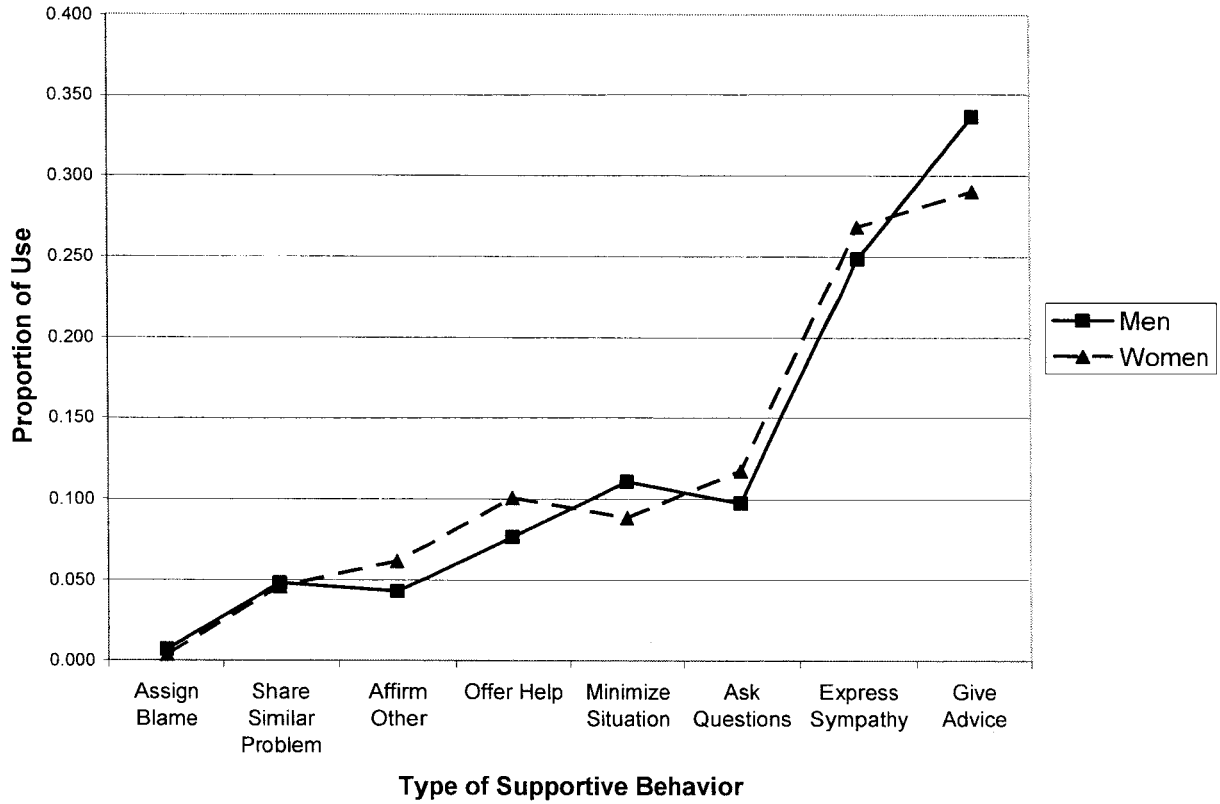


Fig. 4. Proportions of types of support provided in Study 1.

the use of different supportive messages and mediated gender differences in message use. Table V summarizes the correlations between the proportion with which each of the eight message types was used and sex, femininity (expressiveness), and masculinity (instrumentality). Of course, the correlational results for sex merely re-express the results obtained with the ANOVA. Sex (dummy coded as 0 = men and 1 = women) was positively associated with femininity,

$r = .43, p < .001$ , and negatively associated with masculinity,  $r = -.32, p < .001$ . Femininity (expressiveness) was positively associated with the proportional use of expressions of sympathy,  $r = .13, p < .05$ , and affirmations of the other,  $r = .12, p < .05$ , and negatively associated with advice,  $r = -.12, p < .05$ . Masculinity (instrumentality) was positively associated with the proportional use of minimization,  $r = .14, p < .05$ , and, curiously, negatively associated with offers of help,  $r = -.12, p < .05$ .

Table V. Correlations in Study 1 Between Proportions of Message Use and Participant Sex, Femininity, and Masculinity

Message type	Participant sex	Femininity	Masculinity
Assign blame	-.077	-.113	-.015
Share similar Problem	-.017	-.051	.014
Affirm other	.140*	.123*	-.024
Offer help	.134*	.098	-.119*
Minimize problem	-.104	-.010	.138*
Ask questions	.077	.011	.052
Express sympathy	.087	.132*	-.062
Give advice	-.136*	-.124*	-.034

Note.  $N = 276$ . Participant sex was scored as 0 (men) and 1 (women). \* $p < .05$ .

The mediating effects of gender role orientation could only be assessed for those message variables where there was a gender difference (i.e., proportions of advice, affirmation, and offers of help). Femininity was a potential mediator of gender differences in advice and affirmation, whereas masculinity was a potential mediator of gender differences in offers of help. Hierarchical regressions were used to assess the mediating effects of the appropriate aspect of gender role orientation for the associations between sex and the three message variables. Sex was entered at the first step in the three regression analyses, and the appropriate aspect of gender role orientation was

**Table VI.** Summary of Regression Analyses Assessing the Mediating Effects of Gender Role Orientation on the Association Between Sex and Use of Supportive Messages

Variables	Step	Beta	R <sup>2</sup> change	F change	p change
Affirm the other					
Sex <sup>a</sup>	1	.140*	.020	5.486	.05
Sex	2	.107	.005	1.348	ns
BSRI Femininity (Expressiveness)	2	.077			
Give advice					
Sex	1	-.136*	.019	5.184	.05
Sex	2	-.102	.005	1.451	ns
BSRI Femininity (Expressiveness)	2	-.080			
Offer assistance					
Sex	1	.134*	.018	5.028	.05
Sex	2	.107	.006	1.818	ns
BSRI Masculinity (Instrumentality)	2	-.085			

Note.  $N = 276$ . Participant sex was scored as 0 (*men*) and 1 (*women*).

\* $p < .05$ .

entered at the second step. The results of these analyses are summarized in Table VI and were essentially the same for all three message variables: Although the inclusion of gender role orientation had the effect of reducing the betas for sex below a statistically significant magnitude, the reduction in the magnitudes of the betas for sex was quite small. Moreover, in no case was the *beta* for the aspect of gender role orientation included in the analysis statistically significant; further, in all three cases, the *beta* for sex was larger than the *beta* of the proposed mediator in the final step of the analysis. This pattern of results is inconsistent with the hypothesis that gender role orientation has a mediating effect on the association between sex and the provision of support (see Baron & Kenny, 1986).

## Discussion

The results of Study 1 provide very little support for the hypotheses derived from Tannen and other proponents (e.g., Maltz & Borker, 1982; Wood, 1997a) of the different cultures thesis. Our methodology did not permit us to examine whether helpers changed the subject when confronted with a distressed friend. However, there was no evidence in our data that men were more unresponsive than women to distressed friends. Overall, men and women were equally responsive across the four stimulus situations used in Study 1, and although women were somewhat more responsive to friends facing an impending divorce, men were somewhat more responsive to friends who needed to give a speech and who had recently heard about the death of an old friend. Moreover, men and women were equally likely to express sympathy, share

similar problems with the distressed other, and minimize the other's problem (i.e., discourage worry). Although some research indicates that helpers may use humor when seeking to provide support to distressed others (Bippus, 2000), we observed little evidence in the present study that either men or women provided support by joking with the distressed other. Men did give advice proportionately more often than women, and women were proportionately more likely than men to provide support by affirming the other and offering help (the latter two categories of behavior were not mentioned by Michaud and Warner). However, these three gender differences were small, never accounting for more than 2% of the variance in the proportion of messages used. Of particular note, men and women did not differ in their usage of such theoretically critical message types as expressions of sympathy, sharing similar problems, or minimizing the other's problem (i.e., discouraging worry).

Although the observed gender differences were small in both number and magnitude, we did detect substantial variation in the frequencies and proportions of behavior displayed by the participants in Study 1; this variation was almost entirely due to the type of messages used to provide support. Type of message content (i.e., message category) explained almost 40% of the variance in the frequency of the message used and 45% of the variance in the proportion of the messages used. Both men and women largely provided support by giving advice and expressing sympathy; to a lesser extent, both men and women provided support through asking questions, minimizing the problem, and offering assistance. Both men and women provided support infrequently by affirming the other and sharing similar problems, and virtually

not at all by assigning blame. In general, then, women and men were remarkably alike in the types of support they provided. These results are consistent with other recent work finding few sex differences in the types of supportive behaviors men and women use (e.g., Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Goldsmith & Dun, 1997), but are clearly inconsistent with the different cultures thesis.

Although men and women appear impressively similar in the *types* of support they provide to distressed friends, there may be important differences in the *quality* of the support they provide. For example, Study 1 and other work (e.g., Barbee et al., 1993; Burluson & Gilstrap, 2002; Cutrona & Suhr, 1994) indicate that men and women are both likely to respond to another's distress by providing sympathy. However, other research suggests that there are substantial gender differences in the quality of the sympathy offered to distressed others, with women generally providing more sophisticated and sensitive forms of sympathy than men (e.g., MacGeorge et al., 2003; Samter, 2002). Thus, researchers may find it more productive to focus future studies on differences in the quality of support provided (i.e., differences in provider skill) rather than differences in the types of support provided. Of course, doing this will require abandoning the different cultures thesis given that it maintains that differences in support provision are stylistic rather than skill-based.

Consistent with previous research (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000; Winters & Waltman, 1997), we found that femininity (i.e., expressiveness) was positively associated with expressing sympathy and affirming the other, and negatively associated with giving advice. Masculinity (i.e., instrumentality) was positively associated with minimizing the other's problem and negatively associated with offering help. The associations between gender role orientation and support provision were small, never accounting for more than 2% of the variance. More important, there was no evidence that gender role orientation mediated the gender differences in the provision of support, perhaps because there was little gender effect to be mediated.

In sum, the claim by some theorists (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1993) and researchers (Basow & Rubinfeld, 2003; Michaud & Warner, 1997) that men and women constitute different cultures of communication received little support from Study 1 with respect to the *provision* of supportive messages. In the next two studies we evaluated this claim by examining men's and women's *responses* to supportive messages.

## STUDY 2: RESPONSES TO ADVICE MESSAGES RECEIVED IN REAL-WORLD EPISODES: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES AS A FUNCTION OF SEX AND GENDER ROLE ORIENTATION

### Rationale

To date, three survey or experimental studies have examined gender differences in reactions to advice, and each has yielded different findings. In apparent support of Tannen's (1990) claim that women respond more positively to advice than do men, Michaud and Warner (1997) found that men reported more negative emotional responses to advice than women did, and women reported more positive emotional responses to advice than men did. However, a second study (MacGeorge, Lichtman, & Pressey, 2002) in which participants responded to specific advice messages embedded in a standard hypothetical situation showed that men evaluated advice messages significantly more *positively* than women did. A third study—Basow and Rubinfeld's (2003) application of the CSS—did not detect any gender differences in emotional responses to advice. Given this range of findings, Study 2 was designed to reconsider the question of gender differences in reactions to advice, using a methodology developed to improve upon limitations in previous work.

First, the validity of the assessments of responses to advice used in previous studies is uncertain. An abstract description of advice (used by the studies that employed the CSS) may or may not "cue up" the variety of advice messages that comprise the abstract category, and researcher-constructed advice messages (used by MacGeorge, Lichtman, et al., 2002) may fail to represent the diversity of advice. In contrast, in Study 2, participants reported on their recalled reactions to *naturally occurring* advice they *actually received* in the context of real support-seeking interactions. Thus, the advice messages sampled in Study 2 were free to vary more or less randomly with regard to multiple dimensions of content and style, thereby providing a better representation of the entire category of advice messages. Further, because participants reported on their actual rather than imagined reactions to advice messages, there is improved validity with respect to the assessment of responses to advice.

Second, Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubinfeld (2003) reported only between-groups comparisons of men's and women's responses to advice, a design choice that prohibited their examination

of gender differences in the context of other relevant influences on responses to advice. One set of factors likely to influence responses to advice is qualities of the advice message. Previous research (e.g., MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, & Budarz, in press) has identified several features of advice that influence recipient responses; these include *face support* (the degree to which the advice respects the recipient's desires to be evaluated positively and unimpeded), *usefulness* (the degree to which the advice is comprehensible and relevant to the recipient's difficulty), *feasibility* (the degree to which the advice can be implemented by the recipient), and *absence of limitations* (the degree to which the advice avoids creating more problems than it solves). We obtained assessments of these four advice features in Study 2 to (a) compare the variance in responses to advice explained by substantive properties of advice messages and gender, and (b) assess whether there are gender differences in the extent to which various properties of advice influence responses to advice (i.e., whether gender moderates the effects of substantive advice properties on responses).

Third, although Michaud and Warner (1997) developed the CSS to test Tannen's (1990) speculations about "emotional and evaluative responses" (p. 528) to advice messages, the dependent variables actually measured by the CSS all pertain to *emotional* reactions (e.g., feeling comforted, hurt, angry). Thus, it is uncertain from studies using the CSS whether men and women differ in their evaluative (i.e., cognitive or intellectual) responses to advice or only in their emotional responses. When MacGeorge, Lichtman, et al. (2002) assessed *evaluations* of advice they found that men, not women, rated advice more favorably. Therefore, we examined both evaluations of and emotional responses to advice.

Fourth, although Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) both reported analyses on the seven emotional responses assessed by the CSS, Michaud and Warner's factor analysis of these variables indicated that they represented two somewhat correlated dimensions of response: positive and negative affect. In the current study we avoided representing a single finding as multiple findings by measuring emotional response to advice as a single variable. In addition, we focused on a contextually appropriate emotional response: the extent to which the individual receiving advice felt better able to cope with emotional upset. This choice of dependent variable is supported by theory and research that indicate that improved emotion-focused coping is among the

most salient indicators of support message effectiveness (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Cunningham & Barbee, 2000).

Finally, we sought to extend Basow and Rubenfeld's (2003) assessment of the association between responses to advice messages and dimensions of gender role orientation. Although Basow and Rubenfeld asserted that their results indicate that "it is gender typing, not gender per se, that mediates... responses" to advice (p. 189), they conducted no direct assessment of the extent to which gender role orientation actually mediated gender differences in responses to advice. Thus, we examined both associations between dimensions of gender role orientation and responses to advice, as well as whether gender role orientation mediated the effects of gender on responses to advice.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants ( $N = 278$ , 98 men and 180 women) were recruited from communication classes at a large midwestern university and a medium-sized eastern university. They participated on a volunteer basis at the beginning or end of a class period; in some cases, a small amount of extra credit was awarded by the class instructor. Students were primarily undergraduates (45% freshmen, 33% sophomores, 14% juniors, 8% seniors; average age = 19.5 years). The sample largely consisted of European Americans (65%), but also included Asian Americans (11%), African Americans (7%), Hispanic Americans (3%), and other ethnicities (5%); 11% did not report an ethnic affiliation. A range of majors was represented (27% business, 19% social sciences, 18% pre-professional [e.g., law, medicine], 10% humanities, 9% "hard" sciences, 2% engineering, 1% fine arts, 14% unreported).

After providing informed consent, participants were given a packet that contained 12 questionnaires. Four of the questionnaires are not pertinent to this study and will not be discussed further.<sup>13</sup> The first questionnaire obtained the demographic information reported in the previous paragraph. The second prompted participants to recall a supportive

<sup>13</sup>Other questionnaires in Study 2 included assessments of the expertise of the advice-giver, closeness and influence in the relationship with the advice-giver, qualities of the advice-giver's behavior during the supportive interaction, and the extent to which the problem was resolved at the time of participation in the study. All of these were developed by the first author.

interaction that had occurred within the previous month, and instructed them to recall a conversation in which they discussed an upsetting problem with another person who gave them advice about how to handle the problem. This questionnaire then asked participants to specify how long ago the conversation occurred. Ninety-three percent of the supportive interactions had taken place within the previous month, and 60% had occurred within the previous week. The third questionnaire asked participants to describe the problem they had experienced, including the content of the problem (an open-ended question), and its seriousness. The fourth questionnaire contained closed-ended items that measured participants' perceptions of the advice they received (usefulness, feasibility, absence of limitations, and facework). The fifth questionnaire asked participants to "consider how you thought and felt immediately after the conversation" and then to respond to items for multiple outcomes;<sup>14</sup> the outcome of emotional response to the advice is reported in this study. The sixth questionnaire included several questions about the relationship between the participant and the advice-giver (e.g., the closeness of the relationship). A seventh questionnaire assessed participants' overall evaluations of the advice messages they received. An eighth questionnaire obtained assessments of femininity (expressivity) and masculinity (instrumentality).

#### *Gender Role Orientation*

To decrease overall questionnaire length, we assessed gender role orientation in Study 2 using the short form of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence & Helmreich, 1978); the short form of the PAQ contains 16 items (here, on 5-point scales) compared to the 60 items of the BSRI. Eight of the PAQ items ( $\alpha = .78$ ) assessed participants' self-perceptions of their expressive qualities (e.g., emotionality, warmth), and eight items ( $\alpha = .75$ ) assessed self-perceptions of instrumental qualities (e.g., independence, competitiveness).

#### *Advice Properties*

Participants' perceptions of the advice messages they received were assessed with 5-point, Likert-style

items (see MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, & Budarz, in press). Six items were averaged to form an index of *usefulness* ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Three items assessed *absence of limitations* ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Four items formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .74$ ) for *facework*. Finally, three items formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .76$ ) for *feasibility*.

#### *Dependent Variables*

*Evaluation.* A set of five 5-point Likert scales was used to measure participant evaluations of the overall quality of the advice message. The items composing this measure ( $\alpha = .89$ ) were identical to those used in several previous studies of advice (e.g., Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; MacGeorge, Lichtman, et al., 2002), and assessed the extent to which the message was viewed as helpful, appropriate, sensitive, supportive, and effective.

*Emotional Response.* Three 5-point items developed by MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, and Budarz (in press) were employed to measure participants' emotional response to the advice message they received (that is, the extent to which the advice facilitated coping with emotional distress). The items ( $\alpha = .80$ ) included: "I felt more capable of dealing with any upset feelings I had," "It felt easier to handle any unhappiness I had about the situation," and "I felt better able to manage any emotional distress I was having."

#### *Problem Severity*

The severity of the problems experienced by the participants was assessed by responses to four 5-point Likert-style items ("The problem was a significant one," "The problem was a trivial one," "This was a major problem," and "The problem was an important one"). Reliability increased from .81 to .87 when one of the four items was excluded ("The problem was a trivial one"). Accordingly, an index of problem seriousness was formed from the mean of the three remaining items. On average, problem seriousness was relatively high ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = .93$ ), and men ( $M = 3.85$ ) and women ( $M = 4.01$ ) did not differ in the perceived seriousness of the problems they described,  $t(275) = 1.41$ ,  $p > .15$ .

#### *Power*

With a sample of 98 men and 180 women and a two-tailed  $\alpha = .05$ , power to detect a significant

<sup>14</sup>The other outcome variables were ability to cope with the problem (problem-focused coping), intention to implement the advice, and sufficiency of support (desire to seek support from others; see MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, et al., in press).

**Table VII.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among the Variables Included in Study 2

Variable	Sex	Advice (Facework)	Advice (Utility)	Advice (Feasibility)	Advice (Limitations)	PAQ (Expressiveness)	PAQ (Instrumentality)	Emotional Coping	Message Quality
Advice (Facework)	.12*	—							
Advice (Utility)	.10	.51**	—						
Advice (Feasibility)	-.03	.24**	.41***	—					
Advice (Limitations)	.03	.37***	.35***	.21**	—				
PAQ (Expressiveness)	.35***	.21**	.22**	.13*	.11	—			
PAQ (Instrumentality)	-.14*	.13*	.16**	.04	.13*	.06	—		
Emotional coping	.10	.47***	.45***	.35***	.48***	.21**	.03	—	
Message quality	.05	.50***	.56***	.35***	.49***	.19**	.09	.68***	—
Mean	0.65	3.74	4.29	3.37	3.47	3.95	3.59	3.72	4.20
Standard deviation	0.48	.074	0.59	0.48	1.05	0.55	0.59	0.78	0.79

Note. *N* = 272. Participant sex was scored as 0 (men) and 1 (women).

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.

association between variables was .38 for small effects (*r* = .10) and in excess of .99 for moderate effects (*r* = .30) and large effects (*r* = .50). With a two-tailed  $\alpha$  = .05, power to detect gender differences in associations was .12 for small effects (*q* = 0.10), .66 for moderate effects (*q* = 0.30), and .98 for large effects (*q* = 0.50).

**Results**

*Gender Differences in Responses to Advice*

Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among the variables included in Study 2 appear in Table VII. Of particular note, there were no significant gender differences for either dependent variable (i.e., gender was unassociated with either dependent variable).

Regression analyses were conducted to examine the impact of gender and substantive properties of advice on each of the two responses to advice: facilitated emotional coping and evaluations of message quality. Sex was dummy coded (with men = 0 and women = 1). Following the recommendations of Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003), prior to conducting analyses, the continuous independent variables (the four advice features) were standardized (one method of centering) and product terms among each pair of these variables were formed. Product terms for sex and the four advice features were also formed. The resulting 10 product terms carry the two-way interactions among the five independent variables.

In both regression analyses, sex was entered at the first step, the four assessments of advice properties were entered at the second step, and the 10 product terms were entered at the third and final step.

The results of these analyses are summarized in Table VIII. In the regression for the extent to which advice facilitated emotional coping, sex had no significant main effect, *R*<sup>2</sup> change = .01, *F*(1, 274) = 2.69, *p* > .10. In contrast, the four properties of advice messages collectively accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in emotional coping, *R*<sup>2</sup> change = .37, *F*(4, 270) = 40.76, *p* < .001. All four advice properties accounted uniquely for significant portions of the variance in emotional coping (see Table VIII). Addition of the 10 two-way interaction terms did not result in a significant increase in the explained variance, *R*<sup>2</sup> change = .03, *F*(10, 260) = 1.27, *p* > .25. Moreover, none of the individual two-way interaction terms was statistically significant (though the terms for the sex × face-support and the sex × feasibility interactions approached significance).<sup>15</sup>

In the regression for evaluations of advice quality, sex had no significant main effect, *R*<sup>2</sup> change = .00, *F*(1, 270) = 0.68, *p* > .40. However, the four properties of advice messages collectively accounted for substantial variance in advice quality, *R*<sup>2</sup> change = .45, *F*(4, 266) = 55.00, *p* < .001. All four advice properties uniquely accounted for significant portions of the variance in advice quality (see Table VIII). Addition of the 10 two-way interaction terms did not result in a significant increase in the explained variance, *R*<sup>2</sup> change = .02, *F*(10, 256) = 1.00, *p* > .44. Moreover, none of the individual two-way interaction terms approached significance.

<sup>15</sup>Decomposition of these marginally significant interactions suggested that (a) face support was a slightly stronger predictor of emotional coping for women than for men, whereas (b) advice feasibility was a slightly stronger predictor of emotional coping for men than for women. Details concerning these nonsignificant interactions are available from the first author.

**Table VIII.** Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses in Study 2: Standardized Partial Regression Coefficients at Step of Entry

Independent variables	Dependent variables	
	Message quality	Facilitation of emotional coping
Step 1		
Sex	.050	.099
Step 2		
Facework	.217***	.238***
Feasibility	.161**	.166**
Absence of Limitations	.277***	.303***
Usefulness	.272***	.141*
Step 3		
Sex × Facework	-.072	.195 <sup>†</sup>
Sex × Feasibility	.028	-.192 <sup>†</sup>
Sex × Absence of limitations	.144	.047
Sex × Usefulness	.000	.080
Facework × Feasibility	-.007	.033
Facework × Usefulness	.004	.003
Facework × Absence of Limitations	-.024	.052
Absence of Limitations × Feasibility	-.068	.034
Absence of Limitations × Usefulness	-.039	-.015
Feasibility × Usefulness	-.041	-.027

Note. Participant sex was scored as 0 (*men*) and 1 (*women*).

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Gender Role Orientation and Responses to Advice

A correlational analysis was performed to evaluate the associations between dimensions of gender role orientation and responses to advice. Expressivity was positively associated with both evaluations of advice quality,  $r = .19$ ,  $p < .01$ , and facilitation of emotional coping,  $r = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ . Instrumentality was not associated with evaluations of advice quality,  $r = .09$ ,  $p = .13$ , or emotional responses to advice,  $r = .03$ ,  $p = .45$ . Because sex was unrelated to either emotional coping or message quality, we were unable to conduct the analyses intended to assess whether gender role orientation mediated the effects of sex on responses to advice (i.e., there was no effect of sex for gender role orientation to mediate).

### Discussion

In Study 2, we detected no significant gender differences in emotional responses to or cognitive evaluations of advice. In contrast, properties of advice messages (face support, feasibility, absence of limitations, and usefulness) accounted for a substantial 37% of the variance in emotional responses to advice and 45% of the variance in evaluations of advice. Importantly, gender did not moderate the effects of advice prop-

erties on either emotional reactions to or evaluations of advice.

The results of Study 2 most closely resemble those of Basow and Rubenfeld (2003), who found no differences in the emotional reactions of men and women to an abstract advice message. MacGeorge, Lichtman, et al. (2002) found that men evaluated advice more positively than women; however, this main effect for participant sex was substantially qualified by its interaction with level of face support in the message (although face support strongly influenced evaluations of advice messages by both men and women, women's evaluations of advice were somewhat more strongly influenced by face support than were men's evaluations). Michaud and Warner (1997) found that men responded more negatively to advice than did women; however, the effect size for this gender difference was quite small; it accounted for only about 1% of the variance in emotional reactions. Contrary to the different cultures thesis, the results of these four studies indicate that men and women respond very similarly to advice; any gender differences detected in responses to advice are small, are influenced by measurement and contextual factors, and exist within much more sizeable similarities.

In Study 2 we found that one dimension of gender role orientation, expressivity was positively associated with both emotional reactions to and cognitive evaluations of advice. However, expressivity failed to

mediate gender differences in responses to advice because there were no significant gender differences to mediate.

### **STUDY 3: RESPONSES TO COMFORTING MESSAGES: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES AS A FUNCTION OF SEX AND GENDER ROLE ORIENTATION**

#### **Rationale**

In Study 3 we explored gender differences (and similarities) in responses to expressions of sympathy or comfort. Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) examined gender differences in responses to the expression of sympathy by having participants rate their anticipated emotional reactions to the abstract category of “gives sympathy” for several hypothetical situations. As suggested previously, this method of assessing responses to support messages has numerous limitations; eliciting responses to concrete message exemplars should provide more useful and valid data.

In Study 2 we employed a method that generated a diverse sample of advice messages. Because little theoretical and empirical work has been completed on the nature of effective advice, this broad sample of advice exemplars provided reasonable grounds for generalizing about gender differences (and similarities) in responses to the general category of advice. A different methodological approach was employed in Study 3 because an extensive literature documents the properties of more and less effective comforting messages (see reviews by Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

One analysis of emotional support distinguishes among expressions of sympathy according to the extent to which they exhibit a *person-centered approach* to managing another’s emotional distress (see Burleson, 2003a). In comforting contexts, person centeredness references the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the distressed other’s feelings and perspective. Thus, messages low in person centeredness deny the other’s feelings and perspective by criticizing or challenging the legitimacy of those feelings, or by telling the other how he or she should act and feel. Messages that display a moderate degree of person centeredness afford an implicit recognition of the other’s feelings by attempting to distract the other’s attention from the troubling situation, offering ex-

pressions of sympathy and condolence, or presenting explanations of the situation that are intended to reduce the other’s distress. Highly person-centered comforting messages explicitly recognize and legitimize the other’s feelings by helping the other to articulate those feelings, elaborating reasons why those feelings might be felt, and assisting the other to see how those feelings fit in a broader context.

Both men and women perceive highly person-centered comforting messages to be feminine forms of behavior, and both men and women perceive comforting messages that exhibit low levels of person centeredness to be masculine modes of conduct (Burleson, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2003; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). In addition, considerable research indicates that, on average, women use comforting messages that exhibit a higher level of person centeredness than do men (MacGeorge et al., 2003; Samter, 2002). These findings appear to be consistent with the different cultures thesis (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1993) and the findings reported by Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003).

However, the different cultures thesis suggests that women should respond most favorably to highly person-centered comforting messages, whereas men should respond most favorably to messages that avoid the discussion of feelings and focus on either fixing the problematic situation or directing attention away from that situation (i.e., messages that exhibit a low level of person centeredness). In contrast, Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) maintained that *both* men and women should benefit from highly person-centered comforting messages. According to these theorists, highly person-centered comforting messages facilitate the alleviation of emotional distress by establishing a supportive conversational environment, encouraging distressed others to verbalize feelings, and consequently, fostering sense-making about the upsetting event; there is little reason to expect gender differences in the processing of or responses to these messages.

Consistent with this analysis, several studies (e.g., Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Samter, Burleson, & Murphy, 1987) have shown that both men and women evaluate highly person-centered comforting messages as more sensitive, effective, and helpful than less person-centered messages. Some studies (Jones & Burleson, 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999) indicate that women evaluate highly person-centered messages somewhat more positively than do men, and that men evaluate low-person-centered messages somewhat more positively than do women; however, all

previous studies have shown that both men and women view highly person-centered messages as much more sensitive and effective means of managing emotional distress than low-person-centered messages (Burleson, 2003b).

Study 3 was conducted in an effort to replicate and extend previous research on gender differences in the evaluation of comforting messages. In some previous studies (e.g., Samter et al., 1987), participants have evaluated messages with only one level of person centeredness. In Study 3, we treated level of message person centeredness as a repeated-measures factor; hence, all participants read and evaluated messages reflecting low, moderate, and high levels of person-centeredness. This repeated-measures design should provide greater sensitivity to any gender differences that may exist in message evaluations.

In Study 3, we also examined whether gender role orientation influenced the evaluation of comforting messages. Previous work indicates that evaluations of different comforting messages are associated with several cognitive and personality variables (e.g., Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Burleson & Samter, 1985). To date, however, only Basow and Rubinfeld (2003) have examined whether responses to sympathy vary as a function of gender role orientation (i.e., instrumentality and expressiveness). Thus, we sought to determine whether femininity is positively associated with evaluations of highly person-centered comforting messages, as well as whether masculinity is positively associated with the evaluation of low-person-centered comforting messages.

A third objective for the present study was to determine whether individual differences in gender role orientation mediated gender differences in evaluations of more and less person-centered comforting messages. Thus far, no research has sought to determine whether the gender differences occasionally found in evaluations of comforting messages can be explained in terms of gender role orientation. However, gender role orientation has been found to mediate gender differences in constructs such as supportive communication values (MacGeorge, Feng, & Butler, in press) and goals (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002), so it is reasonable to hypothesize that it also mediates gender differences in evaluations of comforting messages.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in the study were 184 college students at a large midwestern university (89 men

and 95 women). These participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 years; 13.6% were 18–19, 66.3% were 20–21, 16.3% were 22–23, and 3.8% were 24–26. The participants were largely European American (94%); there were 2% African Americans, 2% Asian Americans, 2% Hispanic Americans, and less than 1% who reported “other” as an ethnic affiliation.

### *Procedure*

Participants received a copy of a questionnaire and an answer sheet from a research assistant. The questionnaire booklet consisted of several different instruments. Three of these are relevant to the current study: a brief demographic questionnaire, an assessment of gender role orientation, and an assessment of responses to (or evaluations of) comforting messages.

*Gender Role Orientation.* Individual differences in gender role orientation (i.e., instrumentality and expressivity) were assessed with the 16-item version of Spence and Helmreich’s (1978) Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ). Internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) for the 8-item expressivity scale was .76; internal consistency for the 8-item instrumentality scale was .75.

*Evaluation of Comforting Messages That Varied in Person Centeredness.* Instruments developed by Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, and Burleson (1997) were adapted for use to obtain participants’ evaluations of comforting messages that differed in level of person centeredness. Participants read two randomly ordered situations in which a “good friend” was portrayed as experiencing some form of emotional distress; the sex of the friend was left unspecified as this factor has been found not to influence message evaluations (Burleson et al., 2003). The situations were: (1) coping with a recently announced parental divorce and (2) not receiving an anticipated academic scholarship. Each of these situations has been employed in message construction (e.g., Burleson, 1983) and message perception studies (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999); both have been found to reflect realistic instances in which comforting is relevant.

A list of nine, randomly ordered messages followed each of the hypothetical scenarios. For each situation, three messages exhibited a low level of person centeredness, three message exhibited a moderate level of person centeredness, and three exhibited a high level of person centeredness, as defined by Applegate’s (1980) and Burleson’s (1982) hierarchy

**Table IX.** Sample Stimulus Messages Used in Study 3 (Parental Separation Situation)

## Stimulus situation

Imagine that a good friend of yours recently found out that his or her parents are separating. Since your friend got the news, he or she hasn't been himself or herself. In fact, your friend seems to have gone into a real funk about the whole situation, not wanting to do much of anything, staying to himself or herself, and not going anywhere. Your friend is not only surprised and upset by the impending separation, but is also worried about what the future is going to look like. Please evaluate each message below for its degree of sensitivity and degree of effectiveness in dealing with this situation.

## Low person-centered messages

"I think you're letting this thing with your parents get to you way too much. It's really unhealthy just to mope around all day. Hey, remember that it's your parents' life, not yours. So, don't be so focused on yourself."

"You know, the fact is that there's nothing you can do about what's going on with your parents. The truth is that this kind of stuff happens all the time, so there's no reason to make such a big deal over it."

"C'mon, just try not to think about it. I want you to remember everything else you've got going on in your life right now. I mean, at times like this, you've just got to focus on your own life and what's going on in it. If you do that, I know it will make you feel better, 'cause most of what's happening for you is pretty good."

## Moderate person-centered messages

"You know what? You always feel better when you get out and hang around with your friends. I'm going to a party tonight and I want you to come with me. I'm not going to take no for an answer 'cause I know it will make you feel a lot better."

"I'm sorry this is happening. I really feel for you—and I'm really sorry."

"I'm really sorry to hear about your parents' separation. But you said they weren't actually divorced yet, so maybe there's still a chance they'll get back together. Maybe your parents are just going through a mid-life-crisis kind of thing. You know, just having a rough spot. I hear that's pretty common for people their age. Maybe they can get some counseling that will help them work things out."

## High person-centered messages

"The whole situation with your parents sucks. How are you coping? I know you must be feeling really down. It's got to be scary not knowing what's going on with your parents. This may sound kind of corny, but it's really important to remember that no matter what happens between your mom and dad, they'll both always love you."

"I can see how this could really be getting to you. I guess I'd be pretty devastated if my parents were separating. You always think they'll be together forever and when they're not, it throws your whole world off balance. Nothing makes a lot of sense when something like this happens—you just hurt. That's why it's important to talk about it. I don't mean to pry in your family business, but I'm here for you whenever you need me. Just know that I'm here for you, ready to listen when you want."

"That's really hard. You must be feeling all kinds of different emotions—I mean, you must be scared and confused, and maybe even a little pissed, right? Something like this can really make you wonder about things. And not knowing whether or not your mom and dad will get back together sucks. It's such a complicated situation, and it's got to be frustrating for you. I can imagine that it's hard to cope right now—and probably will be for a while. Just let me know whenever you want to talk about it. No matter how rough this gets, I'm always here to listen."

for comforting strategies.<sup>16</sup> Messages used in conjunction with the parental separation situation are presented in Table IX. Participants were instructed to rate each strategy for its sensitivity and effectiveness on 5-point scales. Previous research indicates that rat-

ings of message sensitivity and effectiveness are highly correlated (e.g., Jones & Burleson, 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999), and provide a good, overall index of perceived message quality.

The reliability of message evaluations was assessed by computing an internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's *alpha*) for the sensitivity and effectiveness ratings at each level of person centeredness (low, moderate, and high). Acceptable internal consistencies were observed for the messages that exhibited low person centeredness ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and high person centeredness ( $\alpha = .81$ ). However, the internal consistency for evaluations of messages that exhibited a moderate level of person centeredness were noticeably lower ( $\alpha = .69$ ); low variability in the ratings of these messages appears to have contributed to the less-than-desirable internal consistency coefficient.

<sup>16</sup>As O'Keefe (2003) has recently shown, formal manipulation checks are not needed—and, indeed, are not feasible—in research designs such as that employed in Study 3 where the concern is with the impact of a message variation (here, person centeredness) on a particular outcome (here, evaluations of message quality). Our experimental messages represented low, moderate, and high levels of the theoretical construct of person centeredness, regardless of participant perceptions of these messages. However, to assess expert consensus about the validity of our message manipulations, we had three researchers who were familiar with the person-centeredness concept review our 18 experimental messages and classify them as manifesting a low, moderate, or high level of person centeredness. All three researchers classified all the 18 messages in the intended manner.

**Table X.** Means and Standard Deviations for Evaluations of Comforting Messages That Vary in Level of Person Centeredness

Level of message person centeredness	Men	Women	Marginal
Low person-centered messages	2.32 (0.52)	2.01 (0.52)	2.17 (0.54)
Moderate person-centered messages	2.89 (0.51)	2.70 (0.49)	2.79 (0.51)
High person-centered messages	3.40 (0.57)	3.65 (0.61)	3.53 (0.60)
Marginal	2.87	2.79	2.83

*Note.* Coefficients in parentheses are standard deviations.

*Power*

With a sample of 89 men and 95 women, and a two-tailed *alpha* of .05, the power of the present study to detect gender differences was approximately .27 for small effects ( $d=0.20$ ), .92 for medium effects ( $d=0.50$ ), and in excess of .99 for large effects ( $d=0.80$ ).

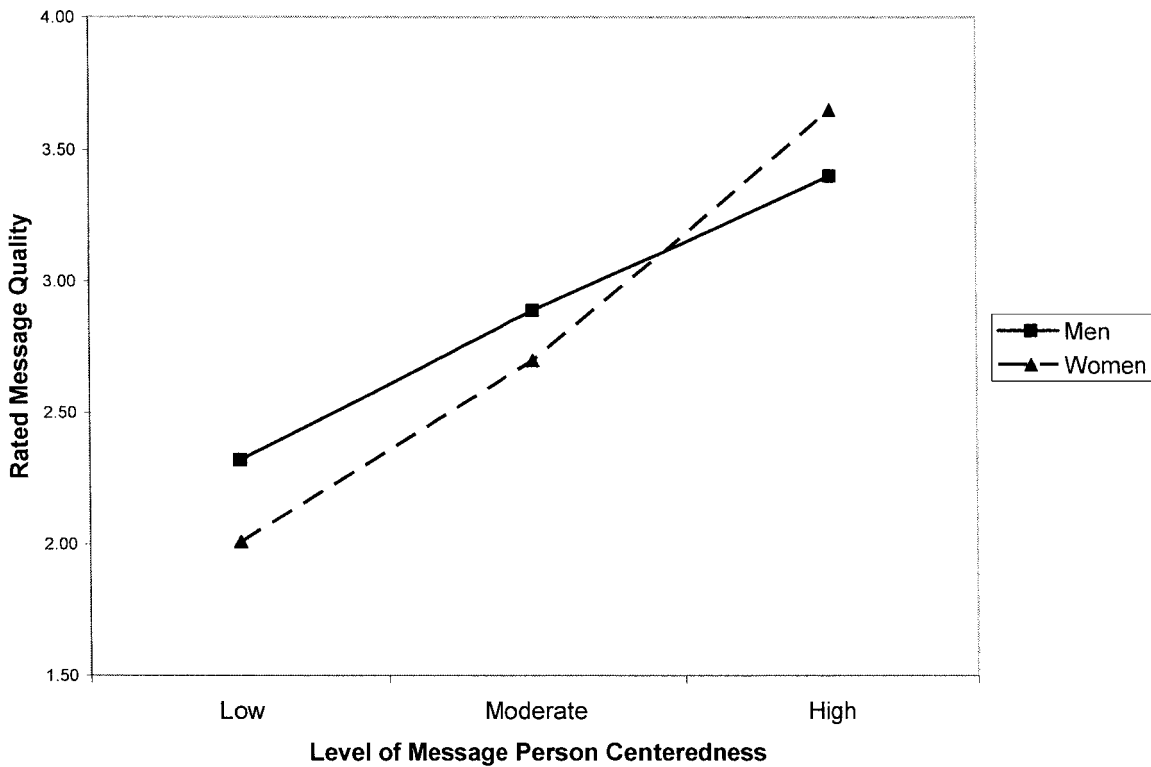
**Results**

*Gender Differences in Responses to Comforting Messages*

Our initial analysis assessed the effects of sex and message person centeredness on evaluations of com-

forting messages in a  $2 \times 3$  mixed-model design with repeated measures on the second factor. Means and standard deviations for this analysis are summarized in Table X. The main effect for participant sex was not significant,  $F(1, 182) = 2.21, p > .14$ . However, a large effect for level of person centeredness on message evaluations was observed,  $F(2, 364) = 393.27, p < .001, \eta^2 = .68$ . In addition, the two-way interaction between participant sex and level of person centeredness was significant,  $F(2, 364) = 18.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ .

Means relevant to these effects are plotted in Fig. 5, which shows that level of person centeredness had a monotonic effect on message evaluations. Both men and women evaluated messages of moderate person centeredness more positively than they



**Fig. 5.** Evaluation of comforting message quality as a function of participant sex and message person centeredness.

evaluated messages of low person centeredness, and both men and women evaluated messages of high person centeredness more positively than they evaluated messages of moderate person centeredness. However, post hoc comparisons revealed that men evaluated low person-centered messages more positively than did women,  $t(182) = 4.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ . Men also evaluated moderate person-centered messages more positively than did women,  $t(182) = 2.64, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . In contrast, women evaluated high person-centered messages more positively than did men,  $t(182) = 2.89, p < .005, \eta^2 = .04$ .

*Gender Role Orientation and Responses to Comforting Messages*

To ascertain whether gender role orientation was associated with the evaluation of more and less person-centered comforting messages, correlations were computed among message evaluations, scores on the two PAQ factors (instrumentality and expressiveness), and sex. These correlations are summarized in Table XI. As expected, expressivity was positively associated with being a woman,  $r = .38, p < .001$ , whereas instrumentality was negatively associated with being a woman,  $r = -.23, p < .001$ . Expressiveness (or femininity) was negatively associated with evaluations of comforting messages that exhibited a low level of person centeredness,  $r = -.14, p < .05$ , and positively associated with evaluations of messages that exhibited a high level of person centeredness,  $r = .19, p < .01$ . Instrumentality (masculinity) was positively associated with evaluations of messages that exhibited a moderate level of person centeredness,  $r = .17, p < .01$ .

Hierarchical regression analyses examined whether individual differences in gender role orientation mediated gender differences in evaluations of comforting messages. Three sets of two-step regression analyses were conducted, one each for evaluations of the low, moderate, and high person-centered comforting messages. At the first step, sex was entered as the sole predictor; instrumentality and expressiveness were then entered at the second step.

The results of these regression analyses are summarized in Table XII. The analyses indicated that gender role orientation had a trivial mediating effect with respect to the association between sex and evaluations for all of the comforting messages. In no case did entry of instrumentality and expressiveness reduce the beta for sex to a nonsignificant level; indeed, the beta for sex was barely reduced at all. The gender role orientation variables made no independent contribution to message evaluations for low or moderately person-centered messages; however, gender role orientation did make an independent contribution to the evaluation of highly person-centered messages. Instrumentality was a significant predictor of evaluations for these messages,  $\beta = .155, p < .05$ , whereas expressiveness was a near-significant predictor,  $\beta = .131, p < .10$ .

**Discussion**

In Study 3, we found that whereas men evaluated low and moderately person-centered comforting messages somewhat more positively than did women, and women evaluated highly person-centered comforting messages somewhat more positively than did

**Table XI.** Intercorrelations Among Sex, Gender Role Orientation, and Evaluations of Low, Moderate, and High Person-Centered Comforting Messages

Variables	Sex <sup>a</sup>	PAQ (Expressiveness)	PAQ (Instrumentality)	Low PC messages <sup>b</sup>	Moderate PC messages	High PC messages
Sex	.50					
PAQ Expressiveness	.38***	.48				
PAQ Instrumentality	-.23**	-.12*	.53			
Low PC messages	-.29**	-.14*	.04	.54		
Moderate PC messages	-.19**	-.08	.17**	.56***	.51	
High PC messages	.21**	.19**	.09	.00	.17**	.60

Note.  $N = 184$ . Coefficients on the diagonal are standard deviations.

<sup>a</sup>Sex was coded as 0 (men) and 1 (women).

<sup>b</sup>PC: person centered.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table XII.** Summary of Regression Analyses Assessing the Mediating Effects of Gender Role Orientation on the Association Between Sex and Comforting Message Evaluations

Variables	Step	Beta	R <sup>2</sup> change	F change	p change
<i>Low person-centered messages</i>					
Sex <sup>a</sup>	1	-.286***	.082	16.24	.001
Sex	2	-.281***	.002	0.02	ns
PAQ (Expressiveness)	2	-.034			
PAQ (Instrumentality)	2	-.033			
<i>Moderate person-centered messages</i>					
Sex	1	-.192**	.037	6.96	.01
Sex	2	-.161*	.017	1.64	ns
PAQ (Expressiveness)	2	.001			
PAQ (Instrumentality)	2	.135+			
<i>High person-centered messages</i>					
Sex	1	.210**	.044	8.38	.004
Sex	2	.196*	.036	3.54	.03
PAQ (Expressiveness)	2	.131+			
PAQ (Instrumentality)	2	.155*			

Note. N = 184.

<sup>a</sup>Sex was coded as 0 (men) and 1 (women).

† p < .10. \* p < .05. \*\* p < .01. \*\*\* p < .001.

men, both men and women overwhelmingly evaluated highly person-centered messages more positively than low person-centered messages. In other words, men and women were much more similar than different in their evaluations of comforting messages. This result directly replicates the findings of several studies that have assessed sex differences in the evaluation of more and less person-centered comforting messages (Burlleson et al., 2003; Burlleson & Mortenson, 2003; Burlleson & Samter, 1985; Jones & Burlleson, 1997; Kunkel & Burlleson, 1999; Samter et al., 1987, 1997). The results of these message evaluation studies were recently extended by Jones and Burlleson (2003), who found that men and women had very similar emotional responses to comforting messages exhibiting different levels of person centeredness.

Thus, in contrast to predictions made by the different cultures thesis, both men and women appear to be best supported by stereotypically feminine modes of comfort—messages that focus on the explicit elaboration and exploration of the distressed other's feelings and perspective. The available evidence thus suggests that the so-called "feminine" style of comforting is not merely one possible speaking style functionally equivalent to other styles (e.g., "masculine") of comforting, but rather is a qualitatively more *skillful* way of providing emotional support (see Kunkel & Burlleson, 1998)—one that benefits both male and female recipients.

Individual differences in gender role orientation (instrumentality and expressiveness) were associated in interpretable ways with evaluations of comfort-

ing messages. Expressiveness was negatively associated with evaluations of low person-centered messages (i.e., messages that discourage the exploration and elaboration of feelings) and was positively associated with evaluations of high person-centered messages (i.e., messages that encourage the articulation and exploration of feelings). Instrumentality was positively associated with evaluations of moderate person-centered messages; these messages typically contain more action-oriented advice than either low or high person-centered messages.

Although instrumentality and expressiveness were associated both with sex and message evaluations, these aspects of gender role orientation were not found to mediate the effect of sex on message evaluations. Some construct presumably explains the variance in message evaluations accounted for by sex; however, it appears that gender role orientation is not that construct. Perhaps other aspects of the interpretive system that vary with sex, such as schema differentiation, explain gender-related variation in message evaluations (see Samter, Burlleson, & Basden-Murphy, 1989).

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The thesis that women and men constitute different communication cultures has met with wide acceptance in the academic community, as well as in our broader society, despite the fact that there have been few efforts directed at testing hypotheses

derived from this thesis. In two studies recently published in *Sex Roles*, Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) and Michaud and Warner (1997) examined gender differences in the provision of and responses to supportive behaviors, and claimed to find corroboration for hypotheses derived from Tannen's (1990) presentation of the different cultures thesis. We identified several limitations in these studies that, collectively, called into question their conclusions. We carried out three studies in an effort to provide a more rigorous evaluation of the hypotheses derived from Tannen (1990).

Several presentations of the different cultures thesis (Bate & Bowker, 1997; Tannen, 1990; Wood & Inman, 1993) claim that supportive communication is a context where "culturally based" gender differences are especially pronounced, and thus a particular source of difficulty for men and women when they converse. Contrary to this notion, our three studies, as well as our re-examination of the results reported by Michaud and Warner (1997) and Basow and Rubenfeld (2003), detected a limited number of statistically significant gender differences, all of which were of small magnitude (typically accounting for only 1–2% of the variance), and all of which were embedded in patterns of extensive similarities. In this, our studies are consistent with the results of other recent empirical tests of the different cultures thesis that indicate many more similarities than differences in women's and men's supportive behaviors (e.g., Goldsmith & Dun, 1997; Oxley et al., 2002), evaluations of supportive communication skills (e.g., Burleson et al., 1996; MacGeorge, Feng, & Butler, in press), responses to supportive messages (e.g., Jones & Burleson, 2003; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999), and goals when providing support (Barbee et al., 1993; Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002). The results of our current studies are also consistent with recent reviews that have reported few and generally small gender differences for a variety of communicative behaviors (Aries, 1996; Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997; Canary & Hause, 1993; Wood & Dindia, 1998), including emotional support (Burleson, 2003b).

We believe that the overall pattern of gender-related similarities and differences in supportive communication is most consistent with the view that, although men and women exhibit *differential skill* with respect to the provision of supportive communication, they are not members of different cultures (see Kunkel & Burleson, 1998, 1999). Both men and women view the provision of support as a central element of close personal relationships; both value

the supportive communication skills of their friends, lovers, and family members; both make similar judgments about what counts as sensitive, helpful support; and both respond quite similarly to various support efforts. On average, however, women are more adept than men at providing sensitive emotional support (e.g., MacGeorge et al., 2003; Samter, 2002). This finding may explain why—contrary to predictions of the different cultures thesis—both men and women largely prefer to seek and receive emotional support from women (e.g., Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988; Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Clark, 1994; Flaherty & Richman, 1989). Perhaps gender-linked socialization experiences, such as the extent to which caretakers talk about feelings with boys and girls (e.g., Dunn, 1998), as well as the different roles that men and women often fill in post-industrial Western societies (e.g., Alexander & Wood, 2000), lead women, as a group, to be somewhat more skilled at the complex psychological and communicative tasks associated with providing emotional support to distressed others. We underscore, however, that these skill differences are inconsistent with the different cultures thesis, which holds that there are different standards for what counts as skillfulness in feminine and masculine speech communities.

In an effort to extend the work of Basow and Rubenfeld (2003), we assessed associations between gender role orientation (the traits of expressivity and instrumentality) and aspects of support provision and response. We further sought to determine the extent to which gender role orientation mediated the effects of sex on support provision and response. Because the gender differences obtained in the current studies were few in number and small in magnitude, there were limited opportunities to examine the mediating effects of gender role orientation. Moreover, even in those cases where significant gender differences were observed, gender role orientation generally did not serve much of a mediating function. For example, Study 1 showed there were significant gender differences in the use of three support message types (giving advice, offering help, and providing affirmation). Gender role orientation did not mediate the effects of sex for any of these variables. In Study 2, there were no significant gender differences in the dependent variables of interest (responses to advice), and thus there was nothing for gender role orientation to mediate. Study 3 yielded significant gender differences in evaluations of comforting messages, but gender role orientation did not mediate the effects of sex for any of these message evaluations.

Although expressiveness and instrumentality did not mediate observed gender differences in the present studies, these variables were regularly, if modestly, associated with several aspects of supportive communication. Thus, it appears that expressiveness and instrumentality may be better viewed as aspects of personality (i.e., individual differences) related to supportive behavior than as proxies for gender. Presumably, there are constructs that explain the gender-related variance in the aspects of supportive behavior examined here, but it appears that the traits of expressivity and instrumentality are not those constructs. This is something of a puzzle given that expressiveness was shown in previous research to mediate gender differences in both interaction goals in support situations (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002) and the value placed on supportive communication skills (MacGeorge, Feng, & Butler, in press).

All studies have limitations, and the three studies reported here are no exceptions. Because supportive communication often addresses sensitive topics, and even more sensitive feelings, it typically occurs in secluded locations that are difficult to observe. Moreover, ethical and practical considerations necessarily restrict the manipulation of human distress, which creates limits for laboratory investigations of supportive communication processes (see Burleson, 2003a). Thus, much of what we know about the provision of and responses to support come from studies that either (a) employ hypothetical scenarios to elicit imagined behaviors or responses from participants, or (b) obtain retrospective self-reports from participants about support episodes in which they were either a helper or recipient. There are limitations inherent in both of these methodological approaches (see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002); however, diversified applications of these techniques, along with less frequent applications of some other methods (e.g., Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Jones & Burleson, 2003), have generated a body of findings that is, at base, fundamentally inconsistent with the different cultures thesis. In particular, the great bulk of survey and experimental findings indicates that there are minimal differences in the surface content of the messages men and women use when seeking to provide support (e.g., Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Goldsmith & Dun, 1997) and equally minimal differences in the responses of men and women to various types of supportive messages (e.g., Jones & Burleson, 2003; Samter et al., 1987). On the whole, men and women are much more similar than different with respect to their provision of, and responses to, supportive messages,

and where gender differences exist they are much smaller than would be expected if men and women truly constituted different communication cultures.

The data used by proponents of the different cultures thesis to evidence their claims, especially regarding supportive behavior, typically have been derived from case studies, ethnographies, personal anecdotes, and illustrations drawn from literature, films, and television. Such evidence has questionable relevance and little probative value with respect to empirical generalizations about how men and women typically, frequently, or regularly communicate (see Burleson, 1997; Goldsmith & Fulfs, 1999; Kyratzis, 2001; Thorne, 1993). As Goldsmith and Fulfs (1999) have shown, although books such as Tannen's (1990) *You Just Don't Understand* might be good entertainment, they are not good scholarship, and should not serve as the basis for serious scholarly claims made in either textbooks or empirical reports.

At present, then, there appears to be virtually no relevant, credible evidence that supports the claim that men and women constitute different communication cultures or speech communities, especially with respect to supportive communication. The notion that men and women constitute different communication cultures appears to be little more than a myth—a myth that has outlived any useful purpose it may have once served. Myths can have useful functions, especially before puzzling phenomena are explored and explained scientifically. Myths provide stories about the world that embody a type of narrative rationality, and thus give meaning to mysterious events. However, the cogency of mythic stories typically stems from their resonance with folk intuitions, stereotypes, and uncritical opinions, and not from the application of systematic logical and empirical rules. For this reason, the claims made by myths (both implicitly and explicitly) are often false.

The different cultures myth has had the salutary effect of motivating a great deal of research on the communicative conduct of boys and girls and men and women, as well as stimulating popular interest in this research. But the substantive claims of the different cultures myth lack an appropriate evidentiary foundation. Thus, there is no reasonable basis for entertaining its theoretical, methodological, or practical implications. In particular, research conducted to test the different cultures thesis provides no reason to believe that (a) the effectiveness of supportive messages is purely a matter of cultural convention, (b) distinct theories of emotion, communication, and personal relationships are needed for each gender, (c)

research on emotion, communication, and personal relationships is flawed by the use of biased “feminine yardsticks” in the assessment of intimacy, closeness, supportiveness, and related constructs, or (d) the interactions and relationships between men and women will be improved by experiences that foster an appreciation of gendered styles of communicating.

The mythical status of the different cultures thesis is now so evident, especially with respect to supportive communication, that we believe it is, henceforth, inappropriate (and irresponsible) for authors of textbooks, self-help books, and similar publications to feature favorably this thesis or leading statements of it. After all, college texts and self-help books are presumably written to inform readers and improve their communicative practices and outcomes; treating a myth as an established fact is unlikely to accomplish these goals. For example, advocates of the different cultures view have encouraged women to utilize “masculine” forms of emotional support when seeking to comfort distressed men (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1993); however, the use of such masculine forms is likely to exacerbate rather than relieve distress and may well damage important personal relationships (see Kunkel & Burleson, 1998; Vangelisti, 1997). If the different cultures myth is covered in textbooks and related publications, it should be treated as a once-interesting but largely misleading (and now disproved) model of gender differences in communication. Of course, it remains perfectly appropriate for researchers to formulate and test hypotheses derived from the different cultures thesis (e.g., with regard to conflict management or other forms of communication); indeed, we encourage such work along with other empirical efforts directed at testing alternative theoretical accounts for gender differences and similarities in social behavior.

A decade ago, Thorne (1993, p. 108) asserted that “the separate-cultures story has lost its narrative force.” Thorne’s claim was, unfortunately, proven false by the continued popularity of the different cultures thesis during the last decade. But it is past time for the myth of gender cultures to lose its narrative force, as well as its privileged place in the professional and popular literatures, for it has been shown to be a story that is false and potentially harmful.

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