Review

Responsive support: A matter of psychological need fulfillment
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Abstract
Skillful responsive support facilitates coping with stressors and overcoming challenges. We posit that support responsiveness is best understood through the prism of psychological need fulfillment and as varying along two dimensions. The *horizontal* dimension speaks to the specificity and breadth of support (i.e., which needs, and how many, are addressed by it, respectively). The *vertical* dimension speaks to the degree to which support is enacted, or perceived to be enacted, in ways that touch on self-coherence needs for *meaning* and *identity*, needs tied most strongly to recipients' core selves. Empathic identification of psychological needs and of their deeper structure, often achieved through good listening, is argued to be the key for effective responsive support.

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Supportive acts aim to help individuals cope with stressors, overcome adversity, and grow to develop their potential for fulfillment [1−3]. At times, support is embedded within ties of reciprocity (e.g., Falconier and Kuhn [4] and Kluger et al. [5]), but at its most basic, support simply involves instances of unidirectional interpersonal regulation of another's emotions or circumstances — as long as these are carried out (or perceived) to serve the recipient's goals or needs.

This basic definition of support emphasizes *providers' intentions* but also touches on *recipients' perceptions*. Many benefits of support are thought to require perceptions of *responsiveness*: individuals are more likely to seek support from others who are seen as responsive and to find support effective when it is perceived as responsive [e.g., Pietromonaco et al. [6] and Wu et al. [7]]. In this brief review, we argue that *responsive support* is best viewed through the prism of psychological need fulfillment.

We begin with defining *responsiveness* vis-à-vis support. According to Reis and Gable [8], responsive support occurs when a provider's actions are expected to lead the recipient to feel understood, cared-for, and validated. Accordingly, perception of responsiveness requires *perception* of action — but not necessarily action. Adopting a somewhat different definition, Feeney and Collins [1] argued that responsiveness *demands action*: specifically, "providing the type and amount of support […] dictated by the situation and by the partner's needs" (p. 121). Under this definition, support would be deemed *responsive* to the extent that *its provision* meets the recipient's situational goals or the needs that underlie them.

We (and others [9−11]) believe that the core of responsiveness indeed lies in the ability to comprehend and meet a partner's underlying needs. Moreover, we posit that support's responsiveness to needs should be evaluated along two dimensions. The horizontal dimension speaks to questions of *specificity* — namely, which need(s) is(are) targeted by the supportive act, as well as *breadth* — namely, how many different needs are implicated by this act. The vertical dimension speaks to the degree to which support is enacted, or perceived to be enacted, in ways that touch on those needs tied most strongly to recipients' core selves (namely, *self-coherence* needs for *meaning* and *identity*) vs. in response to surface-level needs (e.g., time-limited or context-specific wishes or requests).

Recent decades have brought considerable empirical attention to "the paradox of support" [2,12] — the finding that whereas perceived support tends to be consistently beneficial, enacted support often fails to alleviate and may actually intensify recipients' distress. For example, Bolger et al. [13] posited that null or negative effects of support may stem from its visibility, when it engenders feelings of indebtedness and inefficacy, prevents distraction from the problem [2], and impairs autonomy [14]; conversely, invisible support is more likely to confer benefits without incurring these costs (though subsequent studies have qualified this idea [15,16]).

Like Bolger et al. [13], other solutions for this paradox [e.g., Cutrona and Russell [17] and Rini and Dunkel Schetter [18]] were all premised (implicitly or explicitly) on the idea that just as white light unfolds into a spectrum of colors, support unfolds into a multifaceted array of forms and functions when viewed through the right prism. Here, we argue that psychological needs are the prism through which support should be examined and that doing so reveals two dimensions of support responsiveness.

A horizontal dimension of responsiveness

In one relatively *narrow* and intuitive sense, we expect responsive support to help with goal-related outcomes [2,3] — i.e., to serve as coping assistance toward instrumental goals (e.g., moving a bookcase) or emotional goals (e.g., calming down after an heirloom bookcase shatters as it falls down the stairs). A recent meta-analysis of 36 samples [19] reveals that responsive support predicts recipients' efficacy, commitment, and progress toward goals. Interestingly, it differentiated between *responsive* and *practical* support, equating the former with emotionally supportive acts (e.g., reassurance and encouragement). Although practical support may also be provided responsively, the authors reasoned that it would be a less robust predictor of goal outcomes than emotional support. This was indeed the case — but only regarding recipients' *efficacy*. In other words, practical support did seem to meet some needs (specifically, those tied focally to goal pursuit) but not others (namely, those tied to affirmation of competence or efficacy). Thus, we would consider the responsiveness of emotional support to be horizontally *broader* than the responsiveness of practical support.

Not surprisingly, several theoretical models explicitly recognize the broader relevance of support to multiple *needs*, beyond the narrow facilitation of *goal pursuit* or the buffering of *stress* [20]. One such model, Feeney and Collins's *thriving through relationships* framework [1] argues that support processes inevitably touch on both attachment and exploration *needs*, helping build resilience and capitalize on successes [21] rather than simply restoring equilibrium. Recent work [22] testing predictions drawn from Feeney and Collins's model [1] demonstrated that support for retirees' goal strivings, judged by observers to be responsive to the recipients' instrumental needs, was tied to perceptions of partner responsiveness, and through it, to greater perceived capability (i.e., competence need satisfaction) alongside a stronger sense of support availability (i.e., relatedness need satisfaction).

Another model which speaks to support's relevance to multiple needs is self-determination theory (SDT; [23]). SDT's triune taxonomy of needs recognizes that support may meet the dual needs for *competence* and *relatedness* (as noted above), but more importantly, introduces *autonomy* as the most central need, highlighting its interplay with support. According to SDT, support is most responsive and effective when it balances recipients' instrumental needs (for progress towards specific goals) and relational needs (for a sense of belonging and connection) with this central need for autonomy (i.e., agency, authenticity, and control).

Studies using self-reports as well as observational methods to test these SDT predictions within close relationships (e.g., Don and Hammond [24]; for review, see Knee et al. [25]) have shown that both recipients' and providers' autonomy motivation promotes greater levels of support as well as more positive perceptions of supportive interactions. As Don and Hammond [24] note, supportive interactions that sustain recipients' sense of autonomy are likely to be more successful than ones perceived as overly directive. Indeed, the salubrious effects of invisible or nondirective support [13−15] are likely to be driven, at least in part, by the fact that such support preserves recipients' autonomy. Accordingly, Kluwer et al. [26] found that interactions simultaneously meeting relatedness and autonomy needs lead to more constructive relationship behaviors (e.g., remaining connected during conflict).

Research on high-quality listening [27], often examined in the workplace or in lab interactions, has reached similar conclusions. Specifically, high-quality listening, defined as a deceptively simple combination of factors including attentiveness, benevolent motives, interest in (and openness towards) one's interlocutor, and removal of external distractions, appears to simultaneously meet SDT needs for relatedness and autonomy [28].

We posit that a theory of needs that is as inclusive and comprehensive as possible (and thus, one that goes beyond the needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence identified by SDT) is useful in better understanding support responsiveness. We find such a theory in Dweck's [29] recently proposed unified model of motivation, personality, and development, which synthesizes extensive literature on psychological needs from both basic and clinical research and provides a taxonomy of needs.

Dweck's taxonomy [29] views three needs as basic — i.e., universal, present at birth, and non-derivative. The first two, *acceptance* and *competence*, clearly parallel needs identified in SDT [23] and in the *thriving through relationships* (i.e., attachment) perspective [1]. A third one, referred to as *optimal predictability* (i.e., sufficient order and stability), is less often discussed as a basic need but has immediate intuitive appeal (as well as substantial developmental evidence) in its favor. Beyond these three, Dweck [29] posits the existence of four

compound needs: *control* (akin to SDT's autonomy), *trust*, *status/self-esteem*, and *self-coherence* (encompassing meaning and identity). The first three compound needs are thought to each emerge from the conjunction of two basic needs (e.g., *trust* integrating *acceptance* and *optimal predictability*); in contrast, self-coherence is thought to be fed by all other needs and to serve as the "master sensor" of whether things are as they should be.

Evidence for the relevance of needs other than those identified by attachment theory [1] or SDT [23] for responsive support, though scarce, is starting to accumulate (see Table 1). With respect to the basic need for predictability (which underlies a sense of safety and stability), any study documenting supportive acts' threat-reduction effects (e.g., social baseline theory [30] studies) provides indirect evidence, though the degree to which such effects stem specifically from enhanced predictability or are mediated by other needs (e.g., relatedness) remains to be determined. More direct evidence comes from a series of studies by Zee et al. [11] showing that support that meets the need for understanding ("truth"), alongside that for efficacy ("control"), is more effective (in objective terms of self-regulatory success).

With respect to what Dweck [29] called "compound needs," a recent machine learning analysis of a large-scale dyadic dataset [31] provides some intriguing evidence that feelings of *trust* and of *self-esteem* (which are likely to emerge when their respective needs are satisfied) are among the top 10 predictors of perceived responsiveness, both concurrently and longitudinally. Quality listening has been shown to promote autonomy but also self-esteem [32]. Additionally, work by Gable et al. [21] and Reis et al. [33] has shown that responsiveness (vis-à-vis capitalization bids) is predictive of trust — i.e., perceptions of predictable future support from identifiable partners.

Adding a vertical dimension of responsiveness

Dweck's [29] model offers a clear prism for assessing supportive acts along the *horizontal* dimension of responsiveness noted earlier. Importantly, broadly responsive support is not always preferable to narrow support, and it is easy to think of contexts in which a clearly defined need or goal — rather than a wide array of needs — should be the focus of support [e.g., 16]. Additionally, the tolerance for narrow/precise vs. broad responsiveness may itself be trait-like; for example, individuals with more relational entitlement (i.e., excessive expectations of what one deserves to receive from relationship partners) [34] appear to respond more positively to precisely matched support and more negatively to mismatched support.

Notably, because Dweck's [29] model explicitly discusses a hierarchy of needs, it also allows us to assess supportive acts along a *vertical* dimension of responsiveness. With it, we can note the extent to which a supportive act promotes the recipient's self-coherence needs for meaning and identity. Support that has a narrower target (e.g., helping one's child study for the driving test) may be relatively low in the vertical dimension — but not necessarily so. To determine that, the parties involved (or those observing them) would need to examine whether the specific benefits received from these supportive acts touch on the core needs for

Table 1	
Main findings associating responsive support to the needs identified by Dweck [29].	
Need	Supporting Evidence
Acceptance	- Thriving through relationships model; support meets attachment/relatedness needs [1].
	- Self-determination theory; support meets relatedness needs [23].
Competence	- Emotional support is associated with competence [19].
	- Support meets competence needs [22].
Optimal Predictability	- Support that meets the need for understanding ("truth"), alongside that for efficacy ("control"), is more effective [11].
	- Threat reduction effects of support [30].
Control/Autonomy	- Self-determination theory; support meets autonomy needs when it preserves recipients' sense of control [23,24].
	- Invisible/non-directive support preserves autonomy [13–15].
	- support that meets the need for understanding ("truth"), alongside that for efficacy ("control"), is more effective [11].
Trust	- capitalization support predicts trust [21,33].
	- feelings of trust are among the top 10 predictors of perceived responsiveness [31].
	- High quality listening increases trust [37].
Status/Self-Esteem	- feelings of self-esteem are among the top 10 predictors of perceived responsiveness [31].
	- Quality listening promotes self-esteem [32].
Self-Coherence	- Michelangelo phenomenon support affirms ideal self [35].
	- Quality listening promotes identity elaboration [39].

meaning and identity (e.g., getting one's driving license "in time" without losing face, a relatively concrete need, vs. fulfilling one's deepest wish for freedom and independence, a more lofty one).

A prime example of support which, by definition, would be seen as high in this vertical dimension is "the Michelangelo Phenomenon" [35], a form of perceptual and behavioral affirmation of recipients' ideal selves shown to promote movement toward this ideal (and to increase relational and personal well-being). This phenomenon has been shown to generalize across the entire adult life-span — if anything, becoming more important as individuals age [36]; see also [22].

Interestingly, *high-quality listening* [27] too can be considered a strongly responsive form of support both horizontally and vertically. It fulfills needs that go (horizontally) beyond relatedness and autonomy, including psychological safety [28], trust and fairness [37], self-esteem [32], and even a sense of creativity or generativity [28]; for a review, see Van Quaquebeke and Felps [38]. Notably, high-quality listening is likely to have this broad horizontal reach precisely because it also ranks high in the vertical dimension, contributing to self-coherence by promoting the creation and elaboration of *meaningful* narratives that help speakers construct and reconstruct their *identities* [39].

Interesting indirect evidence for the vertical dimension comes from work showing that recipients primed to think more abstractly about support draw more benefit than those primed to think more concretely about it [40]. The former group, asked to consider "why" the support was provided, appeared to construe support using less concrete and more meaningful ways, which increased their motivation and actual goal pursuit.

Just as horizontally broad support is not always preferable, vertically lofty support may at times miss the mark, at least for some. For example, most Big-5 personality traits are tied to low vs. high preference for high-quality listening [41]. Moreover, avoidantly attached individuals reap fewer rewards from being listened to [42] or receiving high-quality emotional support [43].

The idea that high-quality listening is horizontally broad *because* it is vertically lofty is speculative at this point. The same is true for the converse idea introduced in Dweck's [29] needs model, which argues that satisfaction of self-coherence needs inherently involves sufficient fulfillment of all or most underlying needs (hence its special status as a "master sensor" of well-being). In either case, it appears that the two dimensions presented are not orthogonal: support that is sufficiently broad horizontally (i.e., support which targets more than one focal need) is likely to also rank high in the vertical dimension, and vice-versa.

Concluding ideas

Some of the needs discussed above have received considerable attention, but others (e.g., the needs for *optimal predictability* and for *self-coherence*) may be particularly worthy of future study. Of course, additional needs not covered explicitly by Dweck's [29] model may also figure in support responsiveness (see Table 2 for some examples [28,44−50]).

Getting a good sense of our own needs, let alone those of a putative support recipient, is no small feat, yet a key message of this paper is that being responsive horizontally but even more so, vertically — requires such sense. One path towards it may simply be the accumulation of mundane positive interactions with the recipient [51] — though these interactions themselves can be seen as meeting crucial psychological needs for companionship and social embeddedness [30]. Another path toward it may involve high-quality listening [27]. Both paths are likely to lead to responsive support through accurate empathy regarding the other's emotional and psychological needs [52,53].

Social support research has, at times, pitted responsiveness (and particularly satisfaction of relatedness needs) against effectiveness (often equated with goal progress) or at least treated the two as orthogonal [11,12,15,54]. Viewing support responsiveness through the prism of psychological needs, examining its horizontal breadth and fit across multiple needs, and determining whether it reaches vertically lofty self-coherence needs for identity and meanings, may reconcile these two qualities and pave the way toward support whose responsiveness inherently involves effectiveness.

Table 2

Needs not included in Dweck's [29] model which may also be relevant to responsive support.

Need	Relevant Literature
Physical/Sexual needs	[44,45]
Epistemic needs	[46]
Playfulness/creativity needs	[28,47,48].
Caregiving needs	[49]
Quest for Significance	[50]

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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