JSPR

Article

Thanks, but no thanks: Negotiating face threats when rejecting offers of unwanted social support

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships
2017, Vol. 34(8) 1260–1276

DOI: 10.1177/0265407516673161
journals.sagepub.com/home/spr
SAGE

Kory Floyd[1] and Colter D. Ray[2]

Abstract

Social support is a vital component of well-being and a principal benefit of having close, positive personal relationships. When offers of social support are perceived as unwanted or burdensome by recipients, however, they can carry implicit threats to the recipients' positive and negative face needs. Moreover, declining such offers requires recipients to manage probable face threats to providers. The present study explored offers of undesired social support—and responses to those offers—from the perspective of politeness theory and face threats. A total of 503 participants described situations when they were offered social support they saw as undesirable and burdensome. Reasons for not wanting social support (including face threats to receivers) were codified. The most common reasons for not wanting offered support were perceived threats to receivers' negative face, a mismatch between the need and the support being offered, and a perception that providing support would be burdensome for providers. Participants evidenced all five forms of facework in their responses to such offers, with positive politeness being the most common strategy.

Keywords

Facework, face-threatening acts, politeness theory, social support

[1] University of Arizona, USA
[2] Arizona State University, USA

Corresponding author:
Kory Floyd, Department of Communication, University of Arizona, PO Box 210025, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA.
Email: koryfloyd@email.arizona.edu

Particularly during times of crisis, the receipt of social support can be an invaluable aid that helps receivers manage their distress and improves the quality of their relationship with support providers. On occasion, however, individuals are offered support that they do not actually want. This places receivers in a communicative quandary, requiring them either to accept the unwanted support and the burdens it entails or to risk offense to the provider by refusing it. Previous research has examined some of the characteristics of support offers that can make them problematic (Brock & Lawrence, 2009; Burleson, 1994; Goldsmith, 1992); this study extends that knowledge by identifying the problems that recipients of such offers actually perceive. Our focus, therefore, is on support targets and their perceptions of the desirability of support being offered to them. Beyond identifying *why* targets do not want the support they are offered, we also identify how they manage the communicative conundrum of responding to such offers.

We frame our investigation in politeness theory, proposing that offers of social support can carry face threats for receivers, despite their customarily positive effects. Along with threats to face needs, we acknowledge that additional threats or problems may be evident in receivers' perceptions of unwanted support. We therefore pose research questions (RQs) related to the face threats and other problems inherent in social support offers and the relationships, if any, that such threats and problems have with the types of support being offered.

Social support

A valuable component of many relationships is the expectation that people will provide social support for one another in times of need. Support allows recipients to accomplish their goals, resolve challenges, and reappraise problematic situations. MacGeorge, Feng, and Burleson (2011, p. 317) defined supportive communication as "verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid," which suggests that support can be offered in a variety of forms. Among the most frequently used typologies of social support is Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) five-category system, which differentiates between *tangible support* (the provision of money, services, or other material resources), *informational support* (the provision of facts and information to aid decision-making), *network support* (spending time with others to promote affiliation and connectedness), *emotional support* (expressions of love, empathy, and encouragement), and *esteem support* (expressions that bolster the recipient's confidence and self-concept).

Individuals can offer, and subsequently provide, social support in any of these forms. Our focus in the present study, however, is not on those who offer or provide support but on those who *receive offers* of support. A conceptual clarification is worth drawing here. Support can be offered but not accepted. As argued below, refusing an offer of support—which entails receiving the offer but declining to receive the support being offered—may be a common strategy for responding to offers of support that one does not desire. As we will argue herein, support perceived as undesirable even *before* it is received can place recipients in a quandary as to how to respond to the offer.

Although offers of social support can contribute to relationship satisfaction (Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner, & Gardner, 2007), promote individual health (Ditzen & Heinrichs,

2014), and bolster esteem (Holmstrom & Kim, 2015), it is instructive to note that they can create a quandary for receivers, who must decide how to manage them in light of their ongoing relationships with the support providers. Messages intended to convey support can instead imply threats to recipients' individual priorities or to the receiver–provider relationship. In such instances, receivers are faced with the dilemma of either accepting the offer of support and attending to those threats or potentially offending the provider by rejecting the offer. We argue in this article that either course of action requires receivers to manage threats to their own face needs and priorities as well as to those of providers.

Potential problems of social support

Despite their frequent benefits, prior research has attempted to explain why some forms of social support are less beneficial—or not beneficial at all. In a study of marital relationships, for instance, Brock and Lawrence (2009) found that overprovision of social support was as detrimental as underprovision (see also High & Steuber, 2014). Additionally, interactions that are intended to be supportive can instead have negative effects (Goldsmith, McDermott, & Alexander, 2000). Research over the last three decades has also asserted that stress-support matching models (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cutrona & Russell, 1990) can explain why some support fails; however, the results from testing matching models have been mixed. Cutrona and Suhr (1992) admitted following tests of their own *optimal matching model*, and major revisions were needed in order to capture consistently the patterns of matching support type to stressor. Goldsmith (2004) contends matching models are oversimplistic and have limited explanatory power, as they do not account for quality, form, or style of the message content and delivery. Indeed, what remains from the distillation of years of support matching research is that matching models demonstrate "enacted support will buffer stress only insofar as it is responsive to the needs of the recipient and facilitates his or her coping" (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 113) and that people develop preferences for the support they desire (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004).

According to the basic premise of matching models, some offers of social support may be perceived as unhelpful if they are unrelated to the pending crisis. Extending that idea, some offers may even be considered burdensome or intrusive if the costs associated with accepting them outweigh their benefits. Accepting an offer of financial support may benefit the receiver in economic terms, for instance, but may also impose relational burdens—such as the discomfort of being in someone's debt—that result in a net deficit rather than benefit.

Previous studies have therefore established that *receiving* unwanted social support is problematic (Goldsmith, 1992; for recent examples, see McLaren & High, 2015; Ray & Veluscek, in press). We propose even *being offered* unwanted social support places receivers in a communicative quandary. If the people offered support accept such offers, they may invite significant threats to their own face needs that are the result of accepting and having to deal with the support itself. If they reject a support offer, however, they risk hurting the provider's feelings, engendering negative affect, and even threatening

the face needs of the providers. Due to the potential for mutual face threat accompanying an offer of unwanted support, we have grounded our investigation in politeness theory.

Politeness theory and face needs. Brown and Levinson's (1987) *politeness theory* is founded on the assumption that all individuals have, and are concerned with maintaining, *face*. As Goffman (1959, 1967) explained, face represents a person's desired public image—that is, the way he or she wishes to be perceived by others. Extending that idea, Brown and Levinson articulated two distinguishable face needs: the desire for acceptance and approval from others (positive face) and the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition or constraint (negative face). Later research by Lim and Bowers (1991) expanded the construct of positive face by differentiating between two distinct desires: the desire for social inclusion and affection (fellowship face) and the desire for respect (competence face).

Face-threatening acts. Communication behaviors that endanger the face needs of senders and/or receivers are known as face-threatening acts (FTAs). Insults and criticisms, for example, can threaten receivers' fellowship face by impinging on the need for inclusion and can also threaten receivers' competence face by implying a lack of respect. Similarly, requests for favors can threaten receivers' negative face by imposing on their autonomy and constraining their behavioral options.

Even seemingly positive behaviors, such as offers of social support, can nonetheless be face threatening. As Goldsmith (1992) explained, it can threaten a receiver's competence face by suggesting that the receiver is weak or unable to solve his or her problems alone. Likewise, it can threaten the receiver's negative face by invading his or her privacy and imposing unwanted obligations on his or her time and freedom. To these types of threats, we add the observation that receiving an offer of help can potentially threaten a receiver's fellowship face because it implies the provider would be hurt (and possibly reject the receiver) if the offer was not accepted.

Research over the last several decades has found that offers of support vary in their perceived quality and utility according to the level of face threat they imply (Goldsmith, 1992). According to research, the most helpful offers should be conveyed in a manner that recognizes and supports the recipient's face needs (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000). On the contrary, offers that are perceived as offensive or embarrassing can threaten the recipient's face and would be perceived more negatively (DePaulo, 1982; Goldsmith, 1994; Tripathi, Caplan, & Naidu, 1986). Even expressions of affection—commonly considered positive messages—can represent potent face threats for receivers (Erbert & Floyd, 2004).

These observations give rise to specific RQs in the present study. First, we are interested to know what face threats are evident in people's descriptions of offers of unwanted social support (RQ1). Second, we investigated the other reasons, if any, for which offers of social support were perceived to be unwanted (RQ2).

Facework strategies. According to politeness theory, senders who are concerned about the face threats inherent in their message can engage in various redressive actions intended to mitigate such threats. The theory identifies five forms of "facework" or strategies that

senders can use to counter the face threats in their messages. Facework strategies are theorized to be ordered hierarchically according to their degree of politeness. The least polite strategy is to make a statement *bald-on-record*, with no attempt to mitigate face threats. *Positive politeness* and *negative politeness* strategies involve crafting a message so as to mitigate specific threats to positive or negative face, respectively. A fourth strategy is to offer the message *off-the-record* by implying it rather than stating it explicitly. When face threats are inherent in a message, the most polite strategy is simply to *forgo the FTA* altogether by not offering support.

Research shows that facework can mitigate some of the face threat of support offers. MacGeorge, Lichtman, and Pressey (2002) studied people's evaluations of advice that was offered either unequivocally (i.e., delivered bluntly) with mitigating facework (intended to reduce face threats) or with aggravating facework (intended to intensity face threats). Although the underlying recommendation of each type of advice was the same, advice offered with mitigating facework was evaluated more positively than the other types.

We propose that when people receive offers of unwanted social support—regardless of any facework that accompanied the offer—they are faced with the conundrum of either accepting the support and its accompanying face threats or rejecting the offer and potentially threatening the face needs of the provider. In the present study, we explored specifically how receivers of offers of unwanted support manage threats to providers' face needs when responding to those offers (RQ3).

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 503$) were 249 men, 251 women, and three adults declining to indicate their biological sex, ranging in age from 18 to 69 years (mean (M) = 33.75 years, standard deviation (SD) = 10.53). Participants came from 48 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, as well as Canada, India, Macedonia, and the United Kingdom. Most (74.6%) described themselves as Caucasian, whereas 10.9% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 8.9% were Hispanic or Latino/a, 8.3% were Black/African American, 2.8% were Native American, and 1.4% were of other ethnic origins. (These percentages sum to >100 because some participants indicated more than one ethnic background.)

Procedure

All procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board. Participants were recruited via the Amazon.com Web Services crowdsourcing marketplace Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is an online service in which workers (called *providers*) perform functions provided by companies or organizations (called *requesters*) in exchange for money or Amazon.com gift cards. In the present study, a work assignment (called a *hit* on MTurk) was created in which providers were asked to take part in a survey about social support. Those who chose to participate clicked on a link to an online questionnaire. At the conclusion of the questionnaire, providers were given a code to

enter on the MTurk site to verify their completion of the task. Participation was limited to providers 18 years of age or older who qualified as MTurk *masters* (indicating consistently high quality in their work) and who had completed at least 10 previous hits with an approval rating $\geq 90\%$. Providers received US$2.50 in exchange for filling out the questionnaire, which took the average provider 15 min and 55 s to complete. Research has found that samples recruited on MTurk for academic research are often more representative of the U.S. population than are in-person convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; see also Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010).

Measures

Unwanted social support. To frame the issue of undesired social support, we first presented participants with the following instructions:

> When people go through challenging experiences in their lives, their friends and loved ones often offer them social support. Social support can take many forms, including expressions of love and concern; expressions of respect and validation; expressions of belonging and social connection; offers of information and advice; and offers of material resources such as money or help. When we find ourselves in challenging circumstances, we often appreciate and find value in the types of social support others give us. On occasion, however, we can be offered social support that we don't actually want, not only because it wouldn't help our situation, but also because it would actually place a burden on us to accept it. We would like to you recall a time when someone offered you social support that you didn't want because you felt it would be burdensome to accept it. With that situation in mind, please respond to the following questions.

After reading this description, participants were asked to respond to three open-ended questions. The first question was, "Describe the offer of unwanted support. What type of situation were you in and how was the other person offering to assist you?" Second, "Why did you view this person's offer of support as unwanted and potentially burdensome to you?" Finally, "What did you say to this person in response to his or her offer, and why did you choose to respond in this way?"

Type of social support. Participants were also asked to indicate the type(s) of social support the offer comprised, by selecting one or more types reflecting Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) typology: (1) expression of respect, validation, and/or confidence meant to increase my self-esteem; (2) provision of material assistance, such as goods, services, money, or similar resources; (3) expression of love, empathy, and/or concern for me; (4) expression that created a sense of belonging and connection for me; and (5) provision of information, facts, and/or advice about my situation.

Relationship type and closeness. Participants were asked to indicate the nature of the relationship they had with the person offering the support, as well as how close they felt to the person at the time the offer was made (the latter on a 9-point scale in which 1 = *not close at all* and 9 = *very close*).

Table 1. Parameters, reliabilities, and frequencies of reasons why support offers were unwanted ($N = 503$).

Category	Parameters	κ	Frequency
Fellowship face	Threats to receivers' abilities to maintain social inclusion and affection with others	0.83	66 (13.1%)
Competence face	Threats to receivers' abilities to be respected and perceived as competent by others	0.72	44 (8.7%)
Self's negative face	Threats to receivers' autonomy and independence	0.72	207 (41.2%)
Provider burden	Perception that providers would be unduly burdened by providing offered support	0.88	71 (14.1%)
Privacy	Threats to receivers' abilities to maintain privacy and keep sensitive information to themselves	1.00	38 (7.6%)
Non-matching	Perception that support being offered does not match needs of the situation	0.89	104 (20.7%)
Self-serving	Perception that offered support would benefit provider more than receiver	1.00	25 (5.0%)

Note. Frequencies are reported first as raw numbers, with percentages in parentheses.

Coding of open-ended questions

We coded the first two open-ended questions together to respond to RQ1 and RQ2. Coding for RQ1 used an a priori category scheme comprising threats to receivers' fellowship face, competence face, and negative face. The researchers independently coded 10% of the responses for the first two open-ended questions, noting instances of fellowship, competence, and/or negative face threat. The average intercoder reliability (κ) for all three categories was 0.76 (see Table 1 for individual reliability estimates). In response to RQ2, the researchers looked for additional emergent categories—beyond threats to receivers' fellowship, competence, and negative face—representing reasons why offers of social support were unwanted. Four additional categories were identified through an iterative process of examining all responses to the first two open-ended questions, independently noting recurring themes, and then developing parameters for coding those categories. The four additional categories were (1) burdens to providers, (2) invasions of receivers' privacy, (3) providers' self-serving motives, and (4) failure to match recipients' needs. Intercoder reliabilities for the four emergent categories, based on cross-coding 10% of the data, averaged 0.94 (see Table 1 for individual κs).

We coded the final open-ended question to respond to RQ3. The question asked participants what they said to providers in response to the offer of unwanted support. Our principal interest in this question was in identifying the facework strategy participants employed in their response to providers. Thus, we coded their responses according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) five-facework strategies: (1) bald-on-record, (2) positive politeness, (3) negative politeness, (4) off-the-record, and (5) forgo the FTA. When a given response evidenced more than one type of facework strategy, we coded the higher (more polite) strategy. Intercoder reliability, based on cross-coding 10% of the data, was 0.77 (see Table 2 for frequencies of each facework strategy).

Table 2. Frequencies of facework strategies in participants' responses to offers of unwanted support ($N = 503$).

Facework strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Bald-on-record	88	18.0
Positive politeness	194	39.8
Negative politeness	33	6.8
Off-the-record	105	21.5
Forgo the FTA	68	13.9

Note. Frequencies sum to 488 because 15 cases could not be coded for facework strategy, given a lack of detail in participants' responses. FTA = face-threatening act.

Table 3. Frequencies of types of unwanted social support offered ($N = 503$).

Social support type	Frequency	Percentage
Tangible support	285	56.7
Emotional support	210	41.7
Informational support	137	27.2
Network support	79	15.7
Esteem support	49	9.7

Note. Frequencies sum to >503 because participants were allowed to select more than one type.

Common to any coding process, there were moments of disagreement between the authors. These discrepancies were resolved through meetings in which the authors discussed personal interpretations of the definitions of the face threats and facework strategies. Following these discussions, the data was then recoded using the clarified coding criteria.

Results

Descriptive statistics

When asked to indicate the source of the offer of unwanted support, participants most often identified a friend or neighbor (31.8%), whereas 25.2% referenced a parent (including a stepparent or parent-in-law); 13.7% referenced a boss, coworker, or employee; 13.3% referenced a relative other than a parent, sibling, or child; 8.5% reported on a spouse or romantic partner; 7.4% referenced a sibling; and the remainder reported on another relationship (minister, roommate, etc.). Scores for closeness to the source at the time of the offer ranged from 1 to 9 (1 = *not close at all* and 9 = *very close*), with an average of 5.99 ($SD = 2.31$). All five of Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) types of social support were reflected in participant's descriptions (see Table 3 for frequencies).

Reasons for not wanting social support (RQ1 and RQ2)

The first RQ asked what face threats are evident in offers of unwanted social support, and the second question asked for what other reasons (if any) people would not want to

accept an offer of support. Threats to receivers' fellowship face, competence face, and negative face were all evident in receivers' perceptions of offers of unwanted support. Receivers also reported not wanting offered support for four additional reasons: it would pose a burden to providers; it would violate receivers' privacy; the support offered did not match the need; and the offer was self-serving for the provider. Respondents' descriptions contained between zero and three different reasons ($M = 1.10$, $SD = 0.64$). Women and men did not differ from each other in the number of reasons they articulated, t (498) = 1.41; p (two-tailed) = .17. Examples of each response, listed in order of frequency, appear subsequently.

Offered support threatened receivers' negative face (41.2%). Receivers' most common reason for not wanting the support being offered was that accepting the support would threaten their needs for autonomy and independence. Regarding a relative's offer of money to help with impending bills, for instance, one respondent wrote, "It was burdensome because I value my freedom, and being indebted to another person is a burden." In reference to her mother's offer to visit and help after moving into a new house, another respondent said "It was emotionally, mentally, and physically demanding to have company in my house 24/7 and to constantly feel as though I have to entertain her and look out for her."

Offered support did not match receivers' needs (20.7%). Receivers perceived that offers of support were undesirable because the support being offered was not what the receiver needed. For example, one respondent said

> I was preparing to move and at the same time was distressed by issues in my personal life. I spoke with a member of my church and was clear about what I needed in terms of assistance, both with the move and in terms of emotional support. The assistance offered was not at all what I needed.

Offered support posed a burden for providers (14.1%). The third most common reason why receivers did not want the support being offered was because they feared that providing the support would be unduly burdensome for providers. Regarding a friend's offer to care for her children during an important appointment (despite already having several other children to watch at the same time), one respondent wrote "I would feel horrible knowing that I had been to blame for an added burden for her."

Offered support threatened receivers' fellowship face (13.1%). Some receivers did not want the offered support because they were concerned it would threaten their needs for inclusion and affection. When a female friend offered to cheer him up when he felt depressed, one respondent—noting his friend's romantic interest in him—said "I don't like her in that way, and it would mess up our friendship." Another respondent, whose coworkers invited her to drinks to support her in her new job, wrote "I go to bars only for special occasions and being there weekly didn't sound fun to me. However, by

turning them down I was distancing myself from the wants of my co-workers, so I felt compelled to go.''

Offered support threatened receivers' competence face (8.7%). The fifth most common reason why receivers did not want the offered support is that accepting it would make them look incompetent, causing them to lose the respect of others. In the wake of a surgery, for instance, one respondent did not want her colleagues to bring her meals, do housework, or help with her children, because ''Even though I was sick, I still wanted to make a good impression and I felt that I was not.'' Another respondent, whose girlfriend offered him emotional support after he received a scolding at work, said ''I do not like to look weak.''

Offered support violated receivers' privacy (7.6%). Some receivers were apprehensive about offers of support because accepting the support would violate their privacy in some way. When a friend offered emotional support in the wake of her relational breakup, one respondent wrote ''It seemed a bit intrusive, since I keep my emotions very private and like to work things out for myself.'' When others tried to help him adjust to a new home and career, another respondent said the support ''was unwanted because they were actively finding out information about me and spreading very embarrassing information about me.''

Offered support was self-serving for providers (5.0%). Finally, receivers did not want to accept offers of support when they perceived that the support would benefit the providers more than them. One respondent, whose friend offered to talk to him when he struggled with depression, said ''I didn't want to see her. I thought she wanted to use my situation to make herself feel better.'' Another respondent, whose uncle offered to babysit her child while she looked for work, said she didn't want his help because he ''only wanted to help in order to benefit himself. He expected to live with my family rent-free and use it as an excuse that he was helping to take care of my child.''

Facework strategies employed when responding to offers (RQ3)

To address the third RQ, we coded participants' descriptions of how they responded to offers of unwanted social support for the facework strategy or strategies they employed, whether bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-the-record, or forgoing the FTA altogether. All five strategies were represented in participants' descriptions. Examples of each strategy appear below in the order of their frequency.

Positive politeness (39.8%). Responses were coded as representing positive politeness when they included language that attempted to protect the provider's need for affiliation, esteem, and respect. In response to an offer of temporary housing, one participant said ''Thank you so much for caring enough to offer, but I prefer to stay at home.'' Another respondent said ''I thanked her for her help and her kindness and tried to refuse her answer politely. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, as she had good intentions.''

Off-the-record (21.5%). Responses coded as off-the-record were those that did not respond directly to the provider's offer but instead used language that implied the recipient's lack of interest in the offer. In response to a provider's offer, one participant said "I just got silent, and let her talk. When she would ask a question, I would answer with one word, not even making eye contact with her. She eventually got the hint." Another said "Rather than flat out reject them, I tried to skirt around the truth and provide excuses for why I did not want their help."

Bald-on-record (18.0%). When recipients simply rejected providers' offers, with no apparent attempt to mitigate corresponding face threats, their responses were coded as bald-on-record. Some responses were simple rejections, such as the response "I asked her to stop and let me do it on my own because it would be good for me. This was the most direct approach." Others were more anger-laden, such as the response "I called her bad names and told her to mind her own business."

Forgo the FTA (13.9%). We coded as "forgoing the FTA" responses that either acquiesced to the provider's offer or failed to respond to it altogether. For instance, one respondent said "I just tried to avoid him because I was not sure how to act," and another said "I accepted, and I didn't act ashamed about it, as that would have been extremely disrespectful."

Negative politeness (6.8%). Finally, responses were coded as representing negative politeness when they included language directed at protecting the provider's need for autonomy and freedom from imposition. One respondent said "I thanked him for his offer but assured him I didn't want to place a burden on him, because I didn't want to hurt his feelings." Another said "I told them I didn't want to put them through the trouble of getting the medicine for me."

Discussion

Social support is associated with a wide range of common benefits for receivers and providers alike. Goldsmith (1992) was among the first to point out, however, that, although often beneficial, social support has the potential to create problems as well as solve them. For example, this present study revealed that accepting an offer of support can threaten the receiver's autonomy, privacy, ability to maintain relationships, or ability to appear competent. At other times, it can pose a burden or be self-serving for providers themselves, or it can fail to match what the recipient actually needs.

In any of those situations, the offer of social support can place receivers in a quandary as to how best to respond. Whereas previous research has articulated many of the problems that *receiving* social support can entail, little attention has been paid to how support targets manage the delicate communication conundrum of responding to offers of unwanted support in such a way as to preserve their own face needs and those of the providers. In this discussion, we review our findings, articulate their implications for theory and practice, describe strengths and limitations of our design, and offer an important direction for future research.

On the basis of politeness theory, we surmised that threats to fellowship, competence, and negative face would be evident in receivers' descriptions of unwanted support offers. We recognized, however, that face needs are not the only priorities people protect, so we approached inductively the question of what other threats, if any, would be perceived in offers of unwanted support. Our analyses indicated that threats to negative face needs were the most commonly identified threat in receivers' descriptions. More than 40% of respondents indicated that the social support they were offered impinged on their sense of freedom, autonomy, or self-determination. In many cases, it was clear that managing the support being offered would have constrained respondents' abilities to make their own decisions and operate freely, so these offers were considered burdensome for that reason.

To lesser extents, receivers also perceived threats to fellowship and competence face. In addition, they saw offers of social support as undesirable for a variety of other reasons, including invasions of their privacy, burdens on the providers, a mismatch to their needs, or the perception that the offer was self-serving on the provider's part. Although most recollections of unwanted support were unwanted for one specific reason, many respondents perceived more than one type of threat in the offer they described. In addition, the presence of many of the threats was associated with the type of support being offered, whether network, information, emotional, tangible, or esteem support.

We acknowledge that the wording of our question—to recall a time when someone offered you social support that you didn't want because it would be burdensome to accept it—may have primed participants to think of situations that were inherently threatening to their negative face needs, inflating the percentage of cases (41.2%) in which a threat to negative face was articulated as a reason for not wanting the support that was offered. This feature of our question certainly calls for caution when interpreting the percentage of cases evidencing a negative face threat. Nonetheless, we contend that it does not represent a fatal flaw to the data, because although participants in 4 of 10 cases identified a negative face threat as a reason for not wanting support that was offered, a majority—6 of 10—did not, despite the wording of the question. This suggests that although the percentage (41.2) may be inflated as an artifact of the question wording, the wording did not cause all or even most participants to identify a negative face threat as their reason for not wanting support. Additionally, a more recent study of unwanted support that did not include the potential prime in the question also found negative face threat to be the most commonly cited reason why offered support was unwanted (Ray & Veluscek, in press).

Some may question whether the wording of the question also inflated the category of "not matching receivers' needs" as a reason to reject support offers, insofar as the prompt called for participants to recall offers that were unwanted because they would have been burdensome. Although possible, we contend that there is no necessary relationship between a provision of support being "burdensome" and failing to meet a person's needs. An offer of money, for instance, could clearly meet an emergent need—such as to pay for necessary medication or ward off foreclosure of one's home—yet still be perceived as highly burdensome if it corrupted the relational dynamic between sender and recipient. Thus, although the percentage of cases (20.7) in which failure to meet the need was cited as a reason for not wanting support may have been inflated as an artifact of the question, we see this as unlikely.

In response to the face threats identified in their cases, participants employed one or more of the facework strategies outlined in politeness theory. The most commonly used politeness strategy was positive politeness, which in this study entailed crafting responses in such a way to account for the provider's needs for affiliation, esteem, and respect. Many of these messages expressed gratitude for providers' offers while simultaneously declining them, accomplishing the goal of protecting providers' positive face needs while avoiding the entanglements of unwanted support. In sharp contrast, the second most frequently employed facework strategy, off-the-record responses, contained only an implied rejection of the support offer (such as changing the subject), with no overt attempt to mitigate threats to providers' face needs. Tellingly, the off-the-record strategy was only half as commonly employed as the positive politeness strategy, reflecting a prevalent concern for not offending the providers of even unwanted support.

The remaining three strategies (bald-on-record, forgoing the FTA, and negative politeness) were all employed in less than 20% of the situations described. Bald-on-record is considered to be the most direct and least polite strategy, so it is noteworthy that it occurred at approximately the same frequency as forgoing the FTA, which is considered the most polite facework strategy. Finally, the least used strategy was negative politeness. This strategy refocuses the support offer from being a matter of helping the recipient, to instead being a matter of encroaching on the provider's freedom and autonomy. Such responses to unwanted support offers may not be an effective rejection if the offer truly is not a significant burden to the provider, and because such a response does not convey the recipient's own feelings and thoughts about the support offered.

In addition, nearly two thirds of the descriptions provided used either positive politeness or off-the-record strategies to respond to unwanted offers. Both strategies aim to rejecting the offer of unwanted support, but with varying degrees of directness. Whereas positive politeness will more directly protect the provider's positive face needs and more directly state a rejection of the offer, off-the-record responses accomplish the same end goal more indirectly. For example, by using silence, providing excuses, or changing conversation topics, the support recipient declines the offer (by not accepting it) and therefore protects the provider's face needs in an indirect manner (by not overtly threatening those needs through the denial).

Many of the remaining third of descriptions were split nearly evenly between more intense responses in terms of politeness/impoliteness. It is possible that bald-on-record strategies were employed when participants reached a "breaking point" with the support provider's unwanted offers and the recipient believed the only way to reject the offer was to do so as directly as possible. The opposite response could account for forgoing the FTA. Again, support recipients again come to a "breaking point," but instead of bluntly rejecting the support, they do the opposite and acquiesce and accept the offer. Both strategies, although widely different, are the most direct paths to ending the conversation regarding the support offer.

Implications for scholarship and public practice

The observation that social support can be unwanted is not novel, but an understanding of the reasons *why* it is sometimes unwanted—and of the quandary in which it places

receivers—has implications for both scholarship and public practice. For one, it challenges the notion that certain interpersonal communication acts are inherently positive. Expressions of support, empathy, affection, solidarity, and love are commonly accepted—in both scholarly and lay understandings—as positive for personal relationships (see, e.g., Floyd, 2006). Nonetheless, these and similar behaviors can elicit notably negative reactions when they are unexpected, unwanted, or considered inappropriate (Floyd & Burgoon, 1999; Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999). Parks (1995) and others have long recognized an ideological positivity bias in interpersonal communication scholarship, and the present findings add to a growing literature (e.g., Cupach & Spitzberg, 2010) illuminating the negative aspects of seemingly positive behavior.

The tendency to assume that certain interpersonal behaviors are inherently positive does not afflict scholars alone. We propose that individuals who offer support in close relationships likewise assume—implicitly, at least—that their offers will be well received. A second implication, therefore, is that providers of social support may benefit by recognizing that recipients might find their offers problematic, and for a variety of reasons. Those who offer support that would be burdensome to accept, that does not match receivers' needs, that is costly to offer, that is self-serving, or that threatens receivers' privacy or positive face needs may find their offers rebuffed instead of welcomed. Providers should remember that even offers of support *intended to be helpful* are not necessarily *interpreted as helpful.* Those wishing to be genuinely helpful, rather than self-serving, should therefore consider carefully the needs and priorities of recipients when offering support.

These implications are particularly relevant when dealing with traumatized populations, such as violent crime victims, those recently diagnosed with serious illnesses, and those grieving a significant loss. When people are in such states, it is not uncommon for their loved ones to offer substantial social support, such as offering to give large sums of money or to move in and take over housekeeping duties. We recognize that in many such instances, if not most, providers are sincere and genuine in their desire to be helpful. Despite providers' sincerity, receivers who are already traumatized or grieved may easily see such gestures as burdensome, presumptuous, or overbearing. Such instances may, in fact, cause recipients to experience additional stress beyond what they are already managing, which has implications for their mental and physical health as well as for their relationships with providers.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

As in all research, the current study benefited from certain strengths and endured certain limitations. For one, the sample was larger and more geographically and demographically diverse than that of many social support studies. Online recruitment substantially increases the diversity of the sampling frame compared to the practice of convenience sampling with college students—which has characterized previous research on social support—providing a high degree of confidence in the external validity of the findings.

At the same time, however, online recruitment necessarily limits the sampling frame to those with Internet access. This has the potential to skew the sample toward

those from more developed, more affluent, and more educated populations, which can impede the ability to generalize from these findings. The sample, although diverse, should therefore not be considered random or fully representative of all English-speaking adults.

We chose in this study not to solicit descriptions of unwanted social support offers from traumatized populations, specifically. Our preference was to explore the problems inherent in offers of support elicited from a wider range of circumstances, from traumatic to merely annoying. A potential limitation to that approach is that some of the threats and problems perceived in offers of unwanted support may not have been particularly pronounced or consequential. We did not ask participants to evaluate the *level* of threat they perceived in the situation they described, so we must be careful not to assume that all threats were equally problematic. Future studies ought to include a measure of threat severity posed by unwanted or burdensome offers of support in order to understand the emotional and relational consequences of the offer.

An important direction for future research, therefore, is to examine the process of managing offers of social support in tandem with managing a traumatic or emotionally laden situation. When people lose a loved one, are diagnosed with a serious illness, or face similarly troubling circumstances, what communicative strategies are successful for responding to offers of social support—both welcomed and unwanted—while simultaneously responding to the demands of the situation? Illumination of such strategies would have applied value for helping people deal effectively with trauma when they experience it.

Another potential limitation is that we did not ask participants to distinguish between instance of support that were unwanted and rejected and those that were unwanted but received anyway. Our focus was on how people respond communicatively to offers of support that they do not welcome, rather than on how they react to actually receiving and managing unwanted support. Indeed, it may be the case that some ways of declining an offer of support are more persuasive than others, whereas other strategies are unsuccessful in preventing the unwanted support from being provided. This possibility provides an additional question for future studies to consider.

Authors' note

Kory Floyd (PhD, University of Arizona, 1998) is a professor of communication at the University of Arizona. Colter D. Ray (MA, Texas State University, 2014) is a PhD student in human communication at Arizona State University.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Berinsky, A. J., Huber, G. A., & Lenz, G. S. (2012). Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon.com's mechanical turk. *Political Analysis*, *20*, 351–368. doi:10.1093/pan/mpr057

Brock, R. L., & Lawrence, E. (2009). Too much of a good thing: Underprovision versus overprovision of partner support. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *23*, 181–192. doi:10.1037/a0015402

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language use*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Burleson, B. R. (1994). Comforting messages: Features, functions and outcomes. In J. A. Daly & J. W. Wiemann (Eds.), *Strategic interpersonal communication* (pp. 135–161). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Cohen, S., & McKay, G. (1984). Social support, stress, and the buffering hypothesis: A theoretical analysis. In A. Baum, S. E. Taylor, & J. E. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology and health* (Vol. 4, pp. 253–267). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Cupach, W. R., & Spitzberg, B. H. (2010). *The dark side of close relationships II*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Cutrona, C. E., & Russell, D. W. (1990). Type of social support and specific stress: Toward a theory of optimal matching. In B. R. Sarason, I. G. Sarason, & G. R. Pierce (Eds.), *Social support: An interactional view* (pp. 319–366). New York, NY: Wiley.

Cutrona, C. E., Shaffer, P. A., Wesner, K. A., & Gardner, K. A. (2007). Optimally matching support and perceived spousal sensitivity. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *21*, 754–758. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.21.4.754

Cutrona, C. E., & Suhr, J. A. (1992). Controllability of stressful events and satisfaction with spouse support behaviors. *Communication Research*, *19*, 154–174. doi:10.1177/009365092019002002

DePaulo, B. M. (1982). Social psychological processes in informal help seeking. In T. A. Wills (Ed.), *Basic processes in helping relationships* (pp. 255–279). New York, NY: Academic.

Ditzen, B., & Heinrichs, M. (2014). Psychobiology of social support: The social dimension of stress buffering. *Restorative Neurology and Neuroscience*, *32*, 149–162. doi:10.3233/RNN-139008

Erbert, L. A., & Floyd, K. (2004). Affectionate expressions as face-threatening acts: Receiver assessments. *Communication Studies*, *55*, 230–246. doi:10.1080/10510970409388618

Floyd, K. (2006). *Communicating affection: Interpersonal behavior and social context*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Floyd, K., & Burgoon, J. K. (1999). Reacting to nonverbal expressions of liking: A test of interaction adaptation theory. *Communication Monographs*, *66*, 219–239. doi:10.1080/03637759909376475

Floyd, K., & Voloudakis, M. (1999). Affectionate behavior in adult platonic friendships: Interpreting and evaluating expectancy violations. *Human Communication Research*, *25*, 341–369. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1999.tb00449.x

Gardner, K. A., & Cutrona, C. E. (2004). Social support communication in families. In A. L. Vangelisti (Ed.), *Handbook of family communication* (pp. 495–512). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Goldsmith, D. J. (1992). Managing conflicting goals in supportive interactions: An integrative theoretical framework. *Communication Research*, *19*, 264–286. doi:10.1177/009365092019002007

Goldsmith, D. J. (1994). The role of facework in supportive communication. In B. R. Burleson, T. R. Albrecht, & I. G. Sarason (Eds.), *Communication of social support* (pp. 29–49). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Goldsmith, D. J. (2004). *Communicating social support*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511606984

Goldsmith, D. J., & MacGeorge, E. L. (2000). The impact of politeness and relationship on perceived quality of advice about a problem. *Human Communication Research*, *26*, 234–263. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2000.tb00757.x

Goldsmith, D. J., McDermott, V. M., & Alexander, S. C. (2000). Helpful, supportive and sensitive: Measuring the evaluation of enacted social support in personal relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *17*, 369–391. doi:10.1177/02654075001730004

High, A., & Steuber, K. (2014). An examination of support (in)adequacy: Types, sources, and consequences of social support among infertile women. *Communication Monographs*, *81*, 157–188. doi:10.1080/03637751.2013.878868

Holmstrom, A. J., & Kim, S. (2015). The mediating role of cognitive reattribution and reappraisal in the esteem support process. *Communication Research*, *42*, 60–86. doi:10.1177/0093650212449015

Lim, T. S., & Bowers, J. W. (1991). Facework: Solidarity, approbation, and tact. *Human Communication Research*, *17*, 415–449. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1991.tb00239.x

MacGeorge, E. L., Feng, B., & Burleson, B. R. (2011). Supportive communication. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of interpersonal communication* (4th ed., pp. 317–354). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

MacGeorge, E. L., Lichtman, R. M., & Pressey, L. C. (2002). The evaluation of advice in supportive interactions: Facework and contextual factors. *Human Communication Research*, *28*, 451–463. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2002.tb00815.x

McLaren, R. M., & High, A. C. (2015). The effect of over- and under-benefited support gaps on hurt feelings, esteem, and relationships. *Communication Research*, *42*, 1–25. doi:10.1177/0093650215605155

Paolacci, G., Chandler, J., & Ipeirotis, P. G. (2010). Running experiments on Amazon mechanical turk. *Judgment and Decision Making*, *5*, 411–419.

Parks, M. R. (1995). Ideology in interpersonal communication: Beyond the couches, talk shows, and bunkers. In B. R. Burleson (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 18* (pp. 480–497). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ray, C. D., & Veluscek, A. M. (in press). Face threats and additional reasons for perceiving support as unwanted: A study of recently diagnosed cancer patients. *Health Communication*. doi:10.1080/10410236.2016.1228027

Tripathi, R., Caplan, R., & Naidu, R. (1986). Accepting advice: A modifier of social support's effect on well-being. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *3*, 213–228. doi:10.1177/0265407586032006