Article

Communication Research
1–30

DOI: 10.1177/00936502221146629
journals.sagepub.com/home/crx
SAGE

Withholding Social Support Because Those in Need Do Not Deserve It: A Thematic Narrative Analysis

Colter D. Ray[1], Kristina M. Scharp[2], Emily Parker[3], and Dana E. Donohoe[4]

Abstract

Close relationships have norms and expectations regarding the communication of support; however, recent research has illuminated the varied reasons why would-be supporters at times choose to forgo supporting those who are facing difficulties. One such reason is the perception that the other person is undeserving of support. The researchers conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with those who withheld support because they did not believe the other person deserved support. The researchers analyzed the transcripts using thematic narrative analysis, which yielded three identities that nonsupporters construct for themselves and five identities they constructed for those who were undeserving of support. Additionally, certain self-identities tended to co-occur (i.e., align) with certain undeserving identities. These findings provide practical insight into the dilemma of not providing support to others, as well as further support for narrative research that contends people create identities for both the self and others.

Keywords

social support, supportive communication, nonsupport, thematic narrative analysis, identity

[1]Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA
[2]Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
[3]California Southern University, Costa Mesa, CA, USA
[4]Univeristy of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Colter D. Ray, Department of Communication Studies, Louisiana State University, 136 Coates Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA.
Email: colterray@lsu.edu

People often expect to receive supportive messages from loved ones during times of need. When provided appropriately and effectively, supportive communication can result in a variety of positive outcomes, allowing recipients to reappraise stressful events (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and overcome adversity (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Receiving effective and appropriate supportive messages when coping with life's troubling times is vital to one's welfare and an important benefit of developing and maintaining close relationships with others. Decades of research across multiple academic disciplines have explored the benefits, functions, and processes of communicating and receiving support (for review, see MacGeorge et al., 2011).

Although the majority of this research focuses on the benefits of receiving efficacious support messages, a smaller subset of studies has investigated how and why some supportive messages and attempts are less effective (e.g., Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Ray & Veluscek, 2017; Tian et al., 2020). But theories and models of supportive communication often overlook the question of whether support will be communicated whatsoever. Studies have shown that a variety of factors influence the decision to communicate or withhold support. As we will review later in this manuscript, studies by both Dunkel-Schetter and Skokan (1990) and Ray et al. (2019) illustrated several of these reasons and classified them into similar categories.

The more recent of these studies specifically provided an investigation into the reasons why would-be supporters chose to withhold support from someone they know with cancer (Ray et al., 2019). Perhaps the most provocative finding from the study was that nearly 10% of the reasons provided were attributed to the would-be supporter believing that the person with cancer does not deserve their support. The decision to withhold support is likely consequential for the relationship between the would-be supporter and the person in need. Not providing support and consequently violating societal norms might be viewed negatively by both those who do not receive support and those outside of the supporter-receiver relationship, even if the nonsupporter believes they have a valid reason for withholding support.

One strategy people might use to account for their decision to withhold support is telling stories that construct themselves and others in ways that justify their decision. Narratives simultaneously do the work of constructing and reflecting the identities of the self and others (McAdams, 2006; Scharp et al., 2020). In this regard, the stories that would-be supporters tell might be crucial to who they believe themselves to be and how others might perceive them. Put simply, the stories people tell can help mitigate negative evaluations made by those who do not receive support. Furthermore, understanding this identity work is particularly important considering people behave toward others in light of their identities (Blumer, 1969; Haslam et al., 2009). In this regard, identities are often intertwined such that who a person believes others to be depends on who they believe they are and vice versa. This means that stories can provide insight regarding both who a person believes themselves and others to be and why they behave toward others in the ways that they do.

Thus, we have three goals for this study. Our first goal is to investigate the identities constructed by those who chose not to support someone based on the belief that the

person did not deserve support. Our second goal is to examine the identities that these nonsupporters construct for those whom they did not support. Finally, because our identities are interdependent (see Blumer, 1969), our third goal is to explore whether patterns emerge in which certain constructed self-identities consistently co-occur with certain identities constructed for those who did not deserve support. We begin by considering the motivations for not communicating support and the subsequent effects of this decision before discussing narrative as a heuristic for understanding identity performances that occur when people withhold support. In other words, we rely on the deep tradition of interpretive narrative scholarship to serve as the theoretical foundation of the present study.

Withholding Support

Communicating support to someone in times of difficulty is a hallmark of close personal relationships (Rook, 1987; Wentowski, 1981). Thus, the decision to withhold support purposefully does not align with social norms. When people deviate from social norms, others both within and outside of that person's network might engage in some form of social discipline. Indeed, research suggests that when family members engage in behaviors that are perceived as a violation of norms, they might be pushed out of their own families and/or feel different, disapproved of, and/or excluded from the rest of the group (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Yet, people might forgo communicating support to those they know for a variety of reasons (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokan, 1990; Ray et al., 2019). Importantly, researchers have found that receiving an insensitive support message and not receiving a message when a message was expected were nearly equivalent in terms of perceived damage to the supporter-recipient relationship (Ray & Veluscek, 2018). This suggests that instances of withholding support (i.e., nonsupport) can be equally as deleterious as communicating problematic support messages.

Given that not communicating support has the potential to be as detrimental as unsupportive messages, it is worth reviewing why people at times choose to forgo communicating support. Social psychologists Dunkel-Schetter and Skokan (1990) reviewed the support provision research and enumerated four factors predicting whether a potential supporter provides support: recipient factors (e.g., the person's level of distress), provider factors (e.g., supporter's level of empathy), (c) relationship factors (e.g., the history of support provision in the relationship), and (d) stress factors (e.g., supporter's options to address the specific stressor). These four factors largely overlapped with Ray et al.'s (2019) exploration of reasons why people forgo communicating support to those with cancer. Their work also enumerated several reasons for nonsupport that were categorized as provider, recipient, or relationship factors, with their fourth category focusing on practical explanations for not providing support (e.g., no way to contact the diagnosed individual). Thus, it is reasonable that a nonsupporter, in accounting for their decision to withhold support, would need to do so by explaining their decision in light of who the unsupported person is and their relationship with the person they have chosen not to support.

One instance when the support withholder might have to engage in extensive communicative work to explain their actions pertains to instances when they withheld support based on the belief that the person in need did not deserve support (Ray et al., 2019). For example, one participant from the Ray et al. (2019) study expressed that a person did not deserve emotional support regarding their lung cancer diagnosis because they were a lifelong smoker. This sentiment aligns with prior research showing that those who are blamed for creating their ailment were less likely to receive support (Schwarzer & Weiner, 1991). Additionally, some people withheld support as retribution for relational transgressions that occurred at an earlier point in the relationship or because they viewed the cancer diagnosis as "karma" for treating others poorly in the past. Although the examples provided by Ray et al. (2019) depict withholding support as a negative behavior, there are also times when withholding support may be viewed as an appropriate decision. For example, not communicating support as a means of maintaining a healthy boundary within a toxic relationship may be perceived as a more justifiable reason for believing someone does not deserve support. That is, although withholding support is likely viewed as a violation of social norms, we do not view nonsupport as an inherently negative behavior. Rather, people ascribe value judgments to violations of social norms such as not providing support to someone. This in turn can motivate nonsupporters to create narratives that account for their nonsupport decisions.

Because Ray et al.'s (2019) data were open-ended responses, there is little additional detail available to provide an in-depth analysis of why people did not deserve support. We do know, however, from existing literature that not communicating support can be detrimental to relationships (Ray & Veluscek, 2018), that people typically abide by norms of helping friends and family members in need (Rook, 1987), and that these norms are at times violated but not without reason (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokan, 1990; Ray et al., 2019). Thus, narrating the experience and conditions surrounding support being withheld might be a valuable resource for nonsupporters who want to explain their reasoning. As it follows, we next consider the identity issues that surround a decision to not support others because they do not deserve support. We do so by turning our attention to narratives as a heuristic for understanding identity performances.

Narrative as a Heuristic for Understanding Identity Constructions

To serve as a theoretical heuristic, we turned to the narrative literatures broadly. As Giddens (1991) so aptly stated, "A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor – important as it is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*" (p. 54, emphasis in the original). What this means is that the stories people tell not only have implications for both who they believe themselves (and others) to be but also that the stories themselves constitute those identities. As such, McAdams (2006) argued that narratives both help people make sense of their identity when they face a major disruption and have the power to reconstruct identity. Unlike

the majority of existing research that attends to identity (re)construction after an external disruption (e.g., disaffiliation from a religion; Scharp & Beck, 2017) or a particular stigmatizing characteristic or affiliation (e.g., having a disability or belonging to a minority group; Barker et al., 2020; Scranton, 2015) this study advances what we know about how people construct their identities when not engaging in socially expected or acceptable behavior. In the context of this study, it is likely that even though the people did not provide others with supportive communication, they still believed they were good people. Better understanding how people narrate about the gap between who they believe themselves to be (i.e., good people) and how it is they behave might help researchers better interpret the negative outcomes associated with these types of identity gaps (e.g., depression; Amado et al., 2020). In this regard, narratives can provide insight into the identity work people engage in when they violate their own expectations.

In addition to the connection between storytelling and personal identity, a recent study by Scharp et al. (2020) suggested that the stories people tell not only have identity implications for the narrators but also the other characters in the story. Specifically, they found that parents shared stories about their children to third parties that depicted their kids as particular types of children. Constructing others in this way likely has implications for both how narrators see and interact with those they tell stories about (Blumer, 1969) as well as how others might come to see the characters in their stories (Scharp et al., 2020). In fact, symbolic interactionism is predicated on the beliefs that (a) individuals act toward things in light of their meanings, (b) meanings are constituted in social interaction, and (c) individuals interpret and modify meanings within interactions (Blumer, 1969). With this logic in mind, for researchers to understand a narrator's identity, they might also be interested in the other characters in the story and how the narrator perceives them. To date, interpretive narrative research has largely only attended to the identity construction of the narrator (e.g., Scharp & Beck, 2017; Scranton, 2015; Thomas, 2014). In the present study, we recognize the vital role that other people play in how the narrators construct themselves (and others). As it follows, we argue that part of narrators' identity work is interdependent with the ways they are also constructing the identities of the other characters within their story. Consequently, we engaged narrative as an interpretive heuristic to answer our first two research questions:

RQ1: What identities do people construct for themselves after not providing support to someone because they did not believe the person deserved support?
RQ2: What identities do people construct for the people they did not support because they did not believe the person deserved support?

Expanding on the logic that narrators and those they narrate about are interdependent, it stands to reason that narrated identity constructions might also be intertwined. In other words, symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) suggests that meanings are constituted in interaction and people modify their meanings of themselves and others based on these interactions. This means that some identities might co-occur because

who one thinks they are depends on who they think another person is and vice versa. Given this interdependent relationship, particular identities might co-occur. Furthermore, given the context of this particular study, people might be particularly motivated to construct the unsupported person as problematic to justify their nonsupport decision. Better understanding these patterns could be important if people ever want to work on repairing their relationships. That is, if people can better understand how they see themselves and how that co-occurs with how they see others, they might be able to disrupt those constructions and better engage in perspective-taking. This idea of co-occurrence has become increasingly important to scholars who are interested in how emotions (Scharp, 2021) and behaviors (Scharp et al., 2022) co-occur. We extend this logic of co-occurrence to explore how identities might co-occur. Thus, we pose our final research question:

> **RQ3**: What relationships exist between the identities people construct for themselves and the identities they construct for those they did not support because they did not believe support was deserved?

Method

Data Collection

A university's institutional review board approved all procedures. Prospective participants were recruited through convenience sampling methods, including through the lead author's personal networks, social media announcements, an announcement on the Communication, Research, and Theory Network (CRTNET) listserv and NCA Health Communication Division digest, and through class announcements made to introductory level undergraduate courses across multiple disciplines at the lead author's university.

Prospective participants completed a brief online pre-screening survey hosted on Qualtrics to determine they met the study's eligibility requirements. Specifically, eligible participants had to (1) be 18 years of age or older, (2) know someone who has gone through a stressful experience, and (3) have chosen not to support this person based on the belief the individual did not deserve the participant's support. Seventy-six prospective participants completed the prescreening survey, and 74 were eligible to participate based on their answers. A member of the research team contacted those 74 eligible prospective participants to schedule a phone interview. Ultimately, 28 individuals agreed to participate in the study and scheduled and completed a phone interview. Of note, phone interviews were used in lieu of Zoom interviews for two reasons: (1) the data collection occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, when far fewer people regularly used Zoom or similar technology and (2) the institutional review board at the lead author's institution generally preferred phone interviews if video was not needed as a way of reducing risks to participants in the unlikely case that a data breach occurs.

Interviews consisted of two parts. The first part was a narrative interview—an unstructured interview format in which participants describe their experiences as a

personal narrative (Langellier, 1989). Because this is an interpretive study, the authors privileged the participants' perspectives—allowing the participants themselves to identify what it meant for someone to be not deserving of support. The interviewer solicited participants' stories with a prompt that asked them to tell the story of how they came to the decision to not provide support. Specifically, the prompt asked the participant to think of themselves as the author of their story and to share their story step-by-step, beginning with discussing their relationship with the person they did not support and the stressful situation that person was experiencing.

Once the participant had concluded sharing their narrative, the interviewer introduced the second portion of the interview, which was a series of semi-structured questions about the same experience and person discussed in the narrative interview. The semi-structured questions covered a variety of potential issues, including relational transgressions and forgiveness, attribution, emotion, information management, and prior instances of when the participant had supported the person they discussed in their narrative. Following the interview, the lead author compensated participants with a $20USD Amazon eGift card.

After data collection concluded, research assistants and members of the research team transcribed some of the interviews, with the remainder of the interviews transcribed by the transcription service Temi. Members of the research team reviewed automatically transcribed interviews for accuracy and replaced names with pseudonyms. The transcription process resulted in 233 pages of single-spaced text. Interviews ranged in length from 11.50 to 52.33 minutes ($M = 26.97$ minutes, $SD = 11.01$). The brevity of the shortest interview was due in part to the participant providing direct responses and electing to not answer some of the questions in the interview protocol.

Participant Demographics

Of the 28 participants, 21 identified their biological sex as female and 7 as male. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 years ($M = 22.31$; $SD = 5.21$). Half of the participants identified as White ($n = 14$), with other participants reporting their ethnicity as Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 6$), Hispanic/Latinx ($n = 4$), Black ($n = 2$), or Middle Eastern/Iranian ($n = 2$). Two participants did not report their ethnicity and two participants reported two ethnicities. A plurality of participants discussed not supporting a friend or former friend ($n = 12$). Other participants recounted not supporting their father ($n = 4$), a former romantic partner ($n = 3$), a sibling ($n = 3$), their mother ($n = 1$), a former stepmother ($n = 1$), an uncle ($n = 1$), a cousin ($n = 1$), or a fellow organizational member ($n = 1$).

Data Analysis and Verification Procedures

To analyze our data for RQ1 and RQ2, we relied on an interpretive method that researchers commonly use when studying narratives (e.g., Scharp et al., 2015; Thomas, 2014). Thematic narrative analysis (TNA) is a method that requires researchers to treat stories ontologically by focusing on entire narratives instead of their individual parts

(Riessman, 2008). This means that instead of illuminating themes within a narrative, we explored types of stories, in this case, types of narrative identities. Per TNA, the story then was the unit of analysis instead of a code or utterance.

To conduct the TNA, we adapted Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis to identify identity types and the themes that undergird them, Keeping the stories intact is an essential component of TNA. Thus, we engaged in the following five steps: (a) data familiarization and the writing of familiarization notes, (b) categorizing identities holistically by coding each story based on the research questions, (c) refining, defining, and labeling each identity, (d) exploring each identity type for underlying themes through systematic coding, and (e) locating exemplars as one part of a larger verification process. For RQ3, we engaged in a thematic co-occurrence analysis (Scharp, 2021) in which we compared each identity of the nonsupport provider (RQ1) to the constructed identity of the nonrecipient of support (RQ2) by creating a co-occurrence matrix (see Table 1). Based on the standards of recurrence (i.e., how many times two identities co-occurred), repetition (i.e., use of similar phrases), and forcefulness (i.e., the extent to which the relationship between the identities was emphasized and described in rich detail; Owen, 1984) we then determined whether any patterns existed between the emergent identities, noting whether the relationships were sporadic or pervasive and unilateral or bilateral (Scharp, 2021; Scharp et al., 2022). Pervasive relationships are co-occurrences that appear consistently across the data corpus. A unilateral co-occurrence refers to whether the presence of one identity indicated the presence of another identity whereas a bilateral co-occurrence refers whether the presence of one identity indicated the presence of another identity and vice versa. This additional layer of characterizing the co-occurrences allows for a more nuanced interpretation of findings (Scharp, 2021).

In concert with best qualitative research practices, we engaged in five procedures to verify our findings: (a) referential adequacy, (b) peer debriefing, (c) negative case analysis, (d) the audit trail, and (e) exemplar identification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To satisfy the standards of referential adequacy, we began by splitting the data in half. The second and third author analyzed the first half of the data to answer RQ1, talking through differences, and coming to a consensus (i.e., peer debriefing). The first and fourth authors also engaged in peer debriefing as they analyzed the first half of the data for RQ2. All the authors then met as a research team to discuss their findings. For RQ1, the authors reached the point of saturation (i.e., when no new identity types emerged) at story 12 whereas the authors reached saturation at story 11 for RQ2 (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Because we reached saturation for both RQs in the first half of the data, each author then analyzed the remaining narratives in the story corpus. The research team met a second time to discuss their findings, argue through differences, and come to a consensus. For RQ1, the authors decided to combine two identity types into one based on this re-analysis but no new identities emerged. In addition, no new identity types emerged for RQ2. Thus, because the second half of the data did not yield any new types, we met the standard for referential adequacy. All the authors met on two separate occasions to peer debrief the findings. Next, we met the standard of negative case analysis by examining every identity type that emerged in the corpus,

Table 1. Co-Occurrence Matrix: Identities Constructed for the Self and the Other.

	RQ1: Narrator Identities			RQ2 Unsupported Identities				
Participant	Burdened giver (A)	Defeated helper (B)	Obligated victim (C)	Egotist	Lost cause	Lone wolf	Do-nothing	Probationary
1			C	C1				
2	A			A1				
3		B			B1			
4		B			B1			
5	A			A1				
6		B				B2		
7		B					B3	
8	A			A1				
9			C	C1				
10		B					B3	
11			C					C4
12					C2			
13			C					C4
14		B					B3	
15			C		C2			
16			C	C1				
17			C	C1				
18	A			A1				
19			C	C1				
20	A						A2	
21			C			C3		
22		B			B1			
23		B					B3	
24		B			B1			
25		B			B1			
26		B					B3	
27		B			B1			
28	A						A2	

Note. Narrator identities were color-coded and assigned the letters A (green), B (blue), or C (gray). Unsupported identities were assigned the letter that corresponded to the narrator identity and a number that notes multiple unsupported identities were created in tandem with the same narrator identity. For example, B1 denotes the co-occurrence of defeated helper narrator identity with the lost cause unsupported identity, whereas B3 denotes the co-occurrence of the defeated helper identity with the do-nothing unsupported identity.

refining our analysis until all cases were accounted for (see Kidder, 1981). Throughout the process we kept detailed notes in a shared audit trail about our decisions, disagreements, and resolutions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This audit trail helped us select evocative exemplars.

Findings

RQ1: Identity Constructions of Nonsupporters

Our first research question asked what identities people construct for themselves after not providing support to someone because they did not believe they deserved it. We found that narrators constructed three identity types to characterize themselves in their stories about not providing supportive communication: (1) the burdened giver, (2) the defeated helper, and (3) the obligated victim. Overall, these identities varied by relationship type (e.g., friendships, family members, etc.) with the exception of the obligated victim who often felt burdened by biological ties and the societal expectations that family relationships imply (see Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Definitions and exemplars of these nonsupporter identities appear in Table 2.

The Burdened Giver. Burdened givers constructed themselves as people who were overwhelmed by the demands of their relationship. Furthermore, they were often unsure why or how they were part of the relationship in the first place. Andrea described:

> I would have the impression that she thought we were closer friends than I thought we were, and that's really complicated too. This was one of the first friendships in my life where I felt like some of the things that person was telling me—I didn't think I was the right person for her to be telling me that.

Thus, part of the burden was that the nonsupport provider did not feel like they either were the right person to provide support and sometimes even the wrong person. Another primary burden was their perception that they were continuously providing support despite the lack of reciprocity they received in the relationship. Andrea continued:

> . . . she throws out her back and I'm driving her and stuff and then, you know, I was just thinking you wouldn't do this for another person, yet you expect it to be done for you. You wouldn't do it for me. And then like I said, I had like a couple of miscarriages the last year and she never asked me about it, she never brought it up, and it was a really painful thing. And she knew about it, but she never was there for me about it.

Another participant, Tess, discussed a friendship that exemplified continuously providing support in tandem with a lack of reciprocity:

> It was just a constant struggle with her coming in and just trying to vent about a boy. She would always constantly ask for advice, we would give her advice, and we would let her

Table 2. Narrator Identities and Exemplars.

Identity	Definition	Exemplars
Burdened giver	Those who are overwhelmed by the demands of the other and are unsure they are the right person to be providing support. Often perceive they continuously provide support without experiencing reciprocity, and therefore feel used by the other person.	"He didn't deserve my support just based on how he's treated me in the past and how we broke up. I just didn't feel like he deserved my support in something as big as running for a public election. Helping him initially campaign—totally fine, but anything beyond that I was like, okay, that's a lot of work for me to put in for someone who just broke my heart"
Defeated helper	Has a long history of dutifully supporting the other and believes they are the only ones who can resolve the other's problems. They eventually "give up" after several support attempts are ignored or rebuffed, leading them to no longer believe they can help.	"The relationship was going well until maybe 2 months ago when she started being a negative person. I offered help every single time and multiple occurrences, but she just didn't take it. It just kept going down and down. But if she took my advice—if she at least tried a little bit to help herself—it would've gone a little bit upwards, but it's just been going downhill."
Obligated victim	Feels victimized by the other person (or has witnessed the other person victimize others), yet still initially felt obligated to provide support because of the nature of the relationship (often familial). Feelings of obligation erode over time, eventually leading to nonsupport.	"I think he sucks, and I think he really mistreats a lot of people. He wasn't an absent father. He just wasn't a good one. We would respond, we would acquiesce, we would entertain. And then finally we sort of reached a threshold where [we're] not even willing to entertain [supporting] anymore."

> know that we didn't think this was going in a good direction. We also noticed that she would only talk to us when she needed help for that.

When burdened givers reflected on the support they gave, they often perceived themselves as continuing to give because it was the right thing to do. Ultimately, the burdened givers also expressed feeling that, in retrospect, they were being used by the other person.

The Defeated Helper. Defeated helpers typically had a long history with the person they ultimately decided not to support. Overall, they constructed themselves as the consummate helper type who set out to save the other person from their problems because they were the only people who could. Candice described a situation with her sister:

> She, around the age of 16, got pregnant in high school. And then after her pregnancy, I think she had the baby when she was 17 or right before she turned 18, she started drinking a lot and it started affecting employment, not able to maintain jobs, have good healthy relationships. And initially at first, I was super supportive. I helped her a lot, me and my mom helped her a lot with the baby, they lived with us for about maybe a year or so. . . we tried our best to be as supportive because we felt, you know, she's so young. She had a kid so young. She's just trying to figure her life out.

Unlike the burdened giver, the defeated helper did not discuss expecting reciprocity. Rather, the defeated helper continued to try and give help, even if the other person did not take the help or advice. Eventually this leads to the defeated helper "giving up" and deciding to no longer offer any support. Candice continued:

> I took a huge step back and stopped being as maybe supportive as I was before. Now when she calls and she's crying about the father of her child and the things that he does, I don't say anything. I slowly stopped answering those calls, or I change the subject because I have no kind of sympathy for her anymore when she talks about being depressed. Or being sad, I don't have sympathy for that anymore as well. I felt like we—me and my mom—have provided her with so many options and tools to better her life and to better herself. I paid for counseling sessions that she never went to; gave her ample amount of techniques that she could use. I'm a therapist—a counselor. So, I gave her a lot of resources and she chooses not to use them.

Another example of ultimately giving up after several attempts to provide support was provided by Brie, who tried supporting a friend with depression by finding opportunities to spend time together, but the friend consistently canceled on her. Brie shared:

> On this seventh or eighth time we had decided to go do something, I called about 45 minutes before and I'm like, 'Hey, are we good to go?' And she was like, 'Yeah, of course, I'm getting ready now.' Then about 15 minutes before I was in my car, she texted me and said, 'Can we reschedule?' I was thinking, I know you have these issues but if I call 45 minutes prior and try to confirm and do everything I can and you still blow me off,

> I'm not going to support you. I was like kind of fed up with it because I had helped her so many times before.

Ultimately, defeated helpers described giving up because they no longer believed they could help or that their support offers were being taken seriously.

The Obligated Victim. Finally, obligated victims constructed themselves as people who had been victimized by the other person, or witnessed the other person victimize someone else, yet felt obligated to have the relationship with them due to the nature of the relationship (e.g., they are a parent, sibling, family member, or "like family"). For example, Goldy shared:

> My brother and I, we grew up negatively, sort of unwanted, on one hand understanding that it was a court obligation to go see him [her father] there. I just told her our relationship with him was not fantastic. And I never experienced him emotionally or verbally abusive to me, but I witnessed what I would call emotional abuse from him to my brother, which I believe has had some scarring impact. He was not an ideal father, and my time spent with him was not positive.

Indeed, obligated victims reported that they did not owe the other person anything because they were victimized by them. In addition, it might be the case that they believed the other person brought their situation upon themselves and therefore did not deserve support, especially if they had unfairly treated others in their life. Goldy continued:

> I don't know how familiar you are with brain cancer, but it's very aggressive and they have such a short time. And at some point, my brother and I just had a conversation and said this man is not deserving of our support. It seemed as though he made it very, very clear for 30 years that he had absolutely no desire in supporting two children and being the father or engaging in any relationship. And in fact, the things he did, while might not qualify as abusive in nature, were abusive emotionally. And yet here you are in this series of desperate emails telling us that you have a limited amount of time and how nice it would be to know that you had family and all. But that would be nice. Unfortunately, we're not going to gratify that for you.

Another participant, Kyle, described a similar nonsupport situation with his father who was diabetic but did not take medication, leading to the amputation of both legs after suffering an infection. Kyle shared:

> None of this had to happen to him, but he was super stubborn and never got on diabetic medication. He never got on the medication, and he never changed his diet. On a personal level, just the strain that our relationship had and how terrible he was to not only me but to my brother and my sisters. I didn't feel like he deserved the support.

As it follows, obligated victims often concluded that the perceived obligation they once felt slowly eroded over time and given the perceived mistreatment and/or abuse, were no longer indebted.

Overall, these three identities characterized the ways nonsupporters constructed themselves after they decided to not provide support to someone they felt did not deserve it. While providing attributions for their behaviors, narrators ranged in their self presentations from being a victim to an active helper. Of note, narrators constructed themselves as holistically positively despite choosing to withhold their support.

RQ2: Identity Constructions of Those Undeserving of Support

Our second research question explored the identities that narrators constructed for the people they perceived as undeserving of support. Five identities emerged: (1) the egotist, (2) the lost cause, (3) the do-nothing, (4) the lone wolf, and (5) the probationary identity. Definitions and exemplars of these identities appear in Table 3.

The Egotist. Narrators constructed egotists as terrible, selfish people with a long history of mistreating the narrator and others. One of the primary characteristics of egotists was their failure to reciprocate support or put reciprocal effort into relationships. As such, egotists were often depicted as taking advantage of a situation or others. As Kyle described:

> Just the strain that our relationship had and how terrible he was to not only me but my brother, and my sisters . . . I just never felt like he deserved the support. I mean he was given it [support] and he still didn't take advantage of it. He still just mistreated those around him. You know, probably not the most Christian thing to say, but sometimes I thought he was Satan reincarnated.

Thus, when egotists requested support, narrators perceived them as having ulterior motives that were either attention-seeking or motivated by self-interest. For example, Mallory remembered being contacted by her former stepmother:

> She reached out to me and my sister, and at first, we both thought she's lying about having cancer. That sounds awful but we thought she's just doing this for attention, and there must be some other motive for her saying this. She would post things on Facebook, like updates about her treatments, and I remember every time I would scroll past these, I just was disgusted. Like maybe this happened to you because you were a not very nice person in your life.

Narrators, then, were often hyperbolic in their construction of egotists as terrible people and viewed egotists' stressful situations as karmic consequences for their bad deeds.

The Lost Cause. Narrators constructed lost causes as irresponsible people who were perceived to be mismanaging their lives in some way. Despite receiving ample support in the past, they wasted every opportunity to change. For example, Sam shared:

Table 3. Unsupported Identities and Exemplars.

Identity	Definition	Exemplars
Egotist	Terrible, selfish people with a long history of mistreating the narrator and/or others. They typically fail to reciprocate support or make efforts to maintain a healthy relationship. Perceived as having ulterior motives and taking advantage of others.	"I was hurt multiple times by her, and I didn't receive [an apology] from her, so it just got to a point where you can't have someone like that in your life anymore. She doesn't really think about other people's feelings because she's always had everything handed to her, her whole life."
Lost cause	Irresponsible people who have mismanaged their lives and wasted support they have previously received. Their actions have brought pain to the narrator and others and any further support would now be seen as potentially enabling or approving of their continued behaviors.	"It's been so long, and it's happened so many times that it's really hard to believe her when she says 'yeah I'm gonna change' because it's just so hard to forgive her for what she's done. Why should I help you if you're not willing to get help and you continue to do such erratic behaviors?"
Lone wolf	Fiercely independent, and not in need of support. They do not seek support, are emotionally closed off, and/or in denial about their need for support.	"It's okay to not support someone going through [a drug addiction]. Sometimes they may not want the support at all. We eventually confronted him about it. He definitely lashed out at us and made it seem like he needed the drugs, and that it's none of our business to control what he does."
Do-nothing	Persistently complains about their issues and have a negative outlook on life. Their issues are often perceived as trivial and recurring, and they demand support with the issue; however, they ignore useful support and are unwilling to act to resolve their problems.	"I think she is fully responsible for it. She just kept herself in a repeating cycle of chaos and sadness. [She would] put us down when we were trying to help her. I was there for her until it just got to a point where it was really repetitive, and my friend and I like couldn't handle it."
Probationary	Previously harmed the narrator but are now taking responsibility and/or making amends. Although the narrator is currently withholding support, they may become worthy of receiving support if they continue to take responsibility and/or make amends.	"When he really started opening up and being honest with us about what he did–taking responsibility for it—I think I started to forgive him, and I think I'm still in the process of that. I'd be willing to give him support, just not at this time. And that's why I didn't give it to him a couple months ago."

> So basically, she [would] stay out all night and do drugs and never come home and we wouldn't see her for days at a time. So, after that repeated behavior, I just felt like, you know, if you don't want to get help then why should we help you? I mean, she is bipolar. Some of the things she can't help. But at the same time, she's had so many chances to get help in different programs; take different medications to try and make it better. She just hasn't really made a commitment.

As this narrator illustrated, lost causes were somewhat sympathetic characters, due to a history of abuse, mental illness, or drug and alcohol dependence, though they had long since exhausted the goodwill of others. The irresponsible actions of lost causes negatively impacted not only themselves, but the people who cared about them, such as other family members. For example, Jasmine discussed a cousin diagnosed with cancer. Jasmine's mother tried to help the cousin focus on living a normal life by helping the cousin start a small business, but the experience did not go well as the cousin did not seem committed. Instead, he continued problematic behaviors such as drinking and gambling after being diagnosed. This led Jasmine to state:

> So I feel like, in China we say, "help those who help themselves," right? If he's not helping himself then, uh, what can we do?

Narrators believed that offering support to lost causes enabled them or communicated tacit approval for their bad decisions. They justified withdrawing support by expressing hope that their decision would serve as a wake-up call to the lost cause and force them to develop greater personal responsibility.

The Do-Nothing. Narrators constructed do-nothings as having a negative outlook on life and persistently complaining to others about trivial and/or recurring problems. As Patrick explained:

> I continued to try to support her and just think about and try to tackle the problem from as many angles I could possibly think of. But it got to the point where she really wasn't . . . . it didn't feel like she was trying to change. She had a problem, and it didn't feel like she was trying to fix her own problem. It felt like she was more trying to kind of wallow in the issues that she had.

Do-nothings' repetitive demands for support were burdensome to the narrators, who quickly became frustrated when they realized that do-nothings ignored useful advice and were unwilling to act to resolve their problems. As Sarah shared:

> It was kind of like a chronic cycle. And then at one point my best friend and I just stopped helping her because she wouldn't listen to anything we were saying, and we felt like she didn't really care for our opinion and stuff like that. And she just used us as a beating box to like scream her emotions. I want to be there for her as much as I can. But up to a certain point I just wanted her to figure it out herself.

These "chronic cycle[s]" that do-nothings locked narrators into quickly became sources of frustration and typically resulted in a breaking point at which the narrator no longer believed the person deserved their support, either generally or with respect to a specific situation.

The Lone Wolf. Narrators described lone wolves as fiercely independent people who did not want support, nor did they seek support. For example, CJ described:

> It just seemed like he didn't want any help at all. He was completely fine with how his life was going . . . . Maybe he didn't want the help, and he was happy doing his own thing with all of that.

Narrators constructed this identity as emotionally closed off and potentially in denial about their need for support. As MJ explained:

> She just really keeps to herself, and she doesn't like to tell anyone her problems . . . . I feel like by me not reaching out, it really gives her time to reflect on her own and maybe to reach out to other people that love her and care about her . . . . I think she just wants to avoid being vulnerable and she doesn't really know how to handle these situations. So rather than approaching it head on, she just kind of disregards it completely.

Overall, narrators justified that their nonsupport might not be so bad if the person did not want it to begin with. Yet, given that they volunteered for this study, their participation suggests that regardless of whether the person wanted help or not, these narrators would not have given it based on their perception that they did not deserve it. We contend that by speculating that the recipient didn't even want help suggests that the narrators might have been trying to reduce the uncomfortable feelings they had by not offering their support because they did not deserve it.

The Probationary Identity. The probationary identity was constructed for people who had harmed the narrator in the past but were taking responsibility for their actions and beginning to make amends. Jacob explained how he felt after his father confessed to a long-time extramarital affair:

> I would just need to see him do a lot of work; like hard work and actually mean it, and I'm not even sure how to, how to measure that, so I'll, I'll be figuring it out as I go . . . . So, yeah, I'd say when he really started opening up and being honest . . . about what he did, taking responsibility for it, I think I started to forgive him, and I think I'm still in the process.

Although the narrators were hurt by how those on probation had mistreated them, they emphasized the person's recent efforts to change and constructed them as capable of growth. By opening the door, narrators insinuated that they might be willing to be supportive in the future. Jill shared an example of this regarding a sibling who had failed

to support her through depression and an eating disorder, but was now making efforts to reconcile the relationship:

> I know that it's on the road to getting better and just as long as we continue to keep trying with being around each other and accepting that we're both not perfect . . . we can try and be there for each other.

In sum, narrators constructed the unsupported people's identities in a wide range, from terrible people to those on the path to redemption. Certainly, this variance alludes to the ways that certain stories and identity constructions might position narrators to be willing to reconcile in the future. With this in mind, we now turn to the potential relationships between the identities narrators constructed for themselves as well as those they constructed for others.

RQ3: Relationships Between Identities of Nonsupporters and Those Denied Support

Our third research question used thematic co-occurrence analysis to investigate what, if any, relationships existed between the identities people construct for themselves and the identities they constructed for those they did not support. We first note that thematic co-occurrence analysis detects when themes, or in this case identities, co-occur, but this does not assume a co-occurrence happening for every theme/identity. Within our data, two prominent patterns emerged: (1) burden givers and obligated victims constructed egotist identities for those they did not support, whereas (2) defeated helpers constructed lost cause and do-nothing identities for those they did not support. Two unsupported identities (the lone wolf and the probationary) did not co-occur with a narrator identity. All patterns are displayed in the co-occurrence matrix (see Table 1). Characteristics and exemplars of each co-occurrence appear in Table 4.

Burdened Givers and Obligated Victims—The Egotist. When narrators constructed themselves as burdened givers or obligated victims, they also tended to construct the unsupported person as an egotist. In both instances, narrators saw themselves as trapped (i.e., burdened or obligated) in a one-sided or abusive relationship. Indeed, the matrix revealed that this relationship pervaded the corpus such that the relationship between these identities manifested repeatedly. Furthermore, the relationship was unilateral such that the egotist identity was exclusively tied to these two narrator constructions. Caroline who constructed herself as a burdened giver recalled:

> We've been friends for probably, I'd say friends-ish probably for three years now, and throughout the time she was somebody who has a lot of health problems, and throughout that time I have tried to be, in the past I was always trying to be supportive and check on her, and how she's doing. But she has a tendency to kind of take over and want support when you can't give it, or want more support than is normal, at least for how close I would consider us. Throughout the years, she'll ask you a lot of things. She lives probably about

Table 4. Characteristics and Exemplars of Co-Occurrences Between Narrator and Unsupported Identities.

Identities	Characteristics of co-occurrence	Exemplars
Burdened givers and egotists	Egotists' demands and lack of reciprocity are what creates burdened givers' sense of being overwhelmed and feelings of inequity in the relationship.	"She would expect you to drop everything and help her when you really couldn't because you have a schedule that you have to go by, too. I think what made me uncomfortable was just how much she asks for in general if that makes sense. So, my past experiences of her just asking for way too much is why I kind of didn't provide support this time."
Obligated victims and egotists	Egotists' selfish acts victimize others, including potential supporters who feel obligated to still provide support due to the nature of the relationship (most often familial).	"Even on his deathbed, feeling like crap and begging for family to come see him, when they would, he would just continue to treat them like crap. Instead of sitting there and spending actual quality time with my brother and sister who wanted to see him so bad, you know, he would just be on his phone or calling people or making them run just really ridiculous errands for him and stuff."
Defeated helpers and lost causes	Defeated helpers often discuss lost causes as victims of their own bad decisions or circumstances—people who they had unsuccessfully tried to support, leading to refrain from future support attempts.	"She had gotten another DUI and this time it was even more aggravated. The last time she had gotten a DUI she had told me she would never do anything like that again. I always just wanted to be that source of support for her because I do care about her and love her so much. But at the same time, I couldn't really just keep doing that cause I don't think anything would ever change."
Defeated helpers and do-nothing	Defeated helpers view do-nothings as persistently complaining and demanding support but unwilling to take initiative to use the support received to resolve issues. As a result, defeated helpers eventually stopped trying to provide support.	"Nothing I say matters. She doesn't take my advice. It's not like anything I say really, really matters or that's really going to change anything. Uh, they're still going to go through what they're going through. I can't really change it. but I also think she's responsible for not trying do anything about it if she's this bothered by it."

> 20 miles outside of town and she'll in the middle of the afternoon just be like "Oh, I'm sick today. Can you come pick me up and take me to my house?" She does it in a way that's like, it's not like "Oh if you have other plans, it's not a big deal." She kind of makes it seem like a big deal if you say no, if that makes sense So, I decided not to text her this time because I can't really handle a book-long text every day about how she's doing. And she also tends to be the type of person who she thinks her problems are much larger than your problems. So, if you're really sick, she's been way sicker, and your problem was like minuscule to hers. She also doesn't reciprocate. She doesn't provide support to you if you're sick.

As this narrative illustrates, these two identities are co-constructed such as the demands of the egotist are what constitutes the identity of the narrator. The excessive demands of her friend and lack of reciprocity lead Caroline to call into question what she might actually owe her. Ellen shared another example of this, when an ex-romantic partner began asking for professional advice after their break-up:

> I don't mind helping you initially, but when it became more than helping with basic stuff, I was like, okay, this is getting kind of weird. . . .You broke up with me. And he was never super nice to me after the breakup. Why's he being nice? It's because he's using me. He didn't deserve my support just based on how he's treated me in the past.

Although also a reaction to the perceived selfishness of the other person, obligated victims tended to focus more on the abuse they experienced from a family member. For example, Marie discussed her relationship with her "evil stepmother" who told her she had cancer. In this story, Marie and her sister, "both thought like, she's lying about having cancer" and felt:

> How much attention do you need? Like how. . . why are you doing this? It doesn't make any sense. Nobody cares almost. Nobody cares if you have cancer, cause you're a horrible person. And then she posted, "oh I'm in remission and I'm cancer free," and me and my sister we like, "see I told you she was faking it." She didn't even have cancer, now she's all like, "oh I don't have any cancer anymore, and then like two. . . maybe a year after that she was back on Facebook again and saying, "oh I have cancer again" and then she started a GoFundMe. And me and my sister we were like, "oh my God, she's extorting money from people." She doesn't have cancer, and now she's trying to get money from people. Like, this is typical behavior for her. She's such a terrible person. She wants to ruin other people's lives and take their money.

Like the egotists of Caroline and Ellen's stories, Marie constructed her stepmother as being selfish, and went as far as to suggest she was engaging in extortion. Instead of discussing the ways she was disproportionately giving however, Marie instead painted herself as the victim to her stepmother who she described as "storybook mean." Together, these identity combinations allude to the drama triangle where a villain (the egotist) disenfranchises a victim-type character (see Lac & Donaldson, 2020).

The Defeated Helper—The Lost Cause and The Do-Nothing. A second pattern emerged in which those who created a self-identity of being a defeated helper often

constructed the person not deserving of support as a lost cause or a do-nothing. Based on the co-occurrence matrix and similar to the previous narrative relationship, this pattern between identities was also pervasive and illustrated a unilateral relationship such that defeated helpers almost invariably constructed the unsupported people in their narratives as lost causes or do-nothings. Whereas burdened givers and obligated victims constructed themselves as being persecuted by the people in their narratives, defeated helpers often discussed lost causes and do-nothings as victims of their own bad decision-making or bad circumstances, respectively. For example, Sara described her friend as "prone to making really bad choices, whether it be with men or whether it be just with like drugs or, you know, alcohol." She continued:

> I told her she'd have to be the one to want to get help, you know. . . change and do all that stuff on her own. Cause I feel like I was just being too complicit to everything and making. . . I feel like I was just making it worse.

Thus, to help her friend, Sara described the importance of stepping away to let her friend take responsibility for her own actions. Indeed, Sara's description was similar to other defeated helper-lost cause combinations who emphasized the lost causes' irresponsible characteristics and tendency toward reckless and bad decision-making. For example, Taylor shared that they stepped away from supporting a friend who was unhappy with their college experience because of their haphazard decision-making process:

> He chose his school purely based off of which school was ranked as the best party school. He's there right now, and he absolutely hates the school and he is not having a good time. He did not get any financial aid for the school because it's an out-of-state school, and it's very tough financially and he's not having a good time whatsoever. But I do not feel bad for him because he chose the school purely based off of if it's a party school. At first I felt bad . . . but then I realized, he kind of put this upon himself.

In contrast to the characterization of the lost cause identity, defeated helpers frequently created a do-nothing identity for those who had negative attitudes and persistently complained and demanded support. Defeated helpers were frustrated by the triviality or recurring nature of the problems that do-nothings required their help to solve, even more so because do-nothings were unwilling to act on the useful advice they received. Defeated helpers who created a do-nothing identity for the other person were more likely to withdraw support out of sheer frustration when they failed to observe the positive results they expected. A defeated helper, Kara, explained:

> I'm sort of tired of trying to always say or give advice on a topic that I feel like I've been through over and over. I feel like I'm repeating myself with her and I know it's stressful, but it's just the way that she goes about it. I will listen, but man, what's there to say back that you haven't said already when the situation is always the same?

A second defeated helper, Dan, expressed similar sentiments regarding a former romantic partner:

> She wanted to lose some weight and I offered her a plan that my brother gave me personally. She didn't use the plan. There was this situation with her best friend where they weren't talking, and I offered a lot of support, but again, she didn't take my advice. So, this time around, when she was asking for what she should do for her financial issues, I just said that she should situate it on her own, and I didn't offer any support.

Thus, unlike obligated victims, who were aggrieved by the lack of reciprocity in their relationships, narrators who constructed themselves as defeated helpers did not expect such reciprocity from the other person. These individuals willingly took responsibility for helping or even "saving" the other person, though their significant efforts eventually came to naught, and they decided to give up and withdraw support.

In summary, two primary relationships emerged between the ways narrators constructed themselves and the unsupported person. The first relationship emphasized the narrator as victim whereas the second relationship emphasized the unsupported person as victim. Nonetheless, even when the unsupported person was constructed as victim, narrators often positioned themselves as potential and sometimes even failed heroes. Of note, lost causes were often both the villain and victim in the narrative being told about them whereas do-nothing were more often painted as victims of circumstances. Taken together, these findings illustrate that it can be important to recognize not only narrator identity constructions but also the ways those identities interact with other characters within a story.

Discussion

An expectation in most ongoing, close relationships is that people will communicate support to each other when they are in distress (Rook, 1987; Wentowski, 1981); however, recent research has elucidated several reasons why people might forgo communicating support (Ray et al., 2019). Although these reasons for withholding support varied greatly, perhaps the most astonishing finding was the frequency in which people reported withholding support because they perceived that the person in need did not deserve support. To investigate this phenomenon, we conducted thematic narrative analysis with people who withheld support from a distressed individual on the basis that the person was undeserving of support. Specifically, we examined the identities that nonsupporters created for themselves and for those who did not deserve their support. Additionally, we used thematic co-occurrence analysis to explore the extent to which certain self-identities were constructed in tandem with specific identities for people undeserving of support. The ensuing section considers how our findings contribute to the literature on identity, narrative, and supportive communication. We then consider the practical implications of our findings before concluding with the study's limitations and offering future directions.

Implications for Work on Identity and Narrative

This study illustrates that identities created in narratives are not constructed in a vacuum. In the context of this study specifically, the identities that nonsupporters constructed for themselves were created in relationship to the identities nonsupporters

created for those who were undeserving of support. As such, this study problematizes the tendency to focus solely on the ways narratives construct the identities of the narrator at the expense of understanding that communication is constitutive of others' identities, too. With that in mind, our study questions how much agency people have to control their own identities when others are telling stories about them. Ultimately, both self and other identity construction is important because people behave toward others in light of their meaning (i.e., symbolic interactionism). That is, the way that narrators construct the identity of the nonsupport recipient can both work to justify the support withholder's actions but also potentially influence others to withhold support by creating an unfavorable identity for the recipient. In the future, researchers might take a critical approach in examining how individual, dyadic, and ideological power dynamics influence how people perceive the stories they hear about others. Indeed, it is possible that power disparities might mean others have more ability to construct an identity for someone as that person does for themselves. Understanding these power dynamics could have implications for anything from court testimonies (e.g., character witnesses) to employment via professional references.

Another important implication of our study is that patterns emerged in which certain identities created by narrators often aligned with specific identities created by the narrator for the person they framed as undeserving of support. For example, the defeated helper self-identity was often accompanied by constructing the other person as either a lost cause or a do-nothing. A potential explanation for this pattern could be a difference in locus of control and perceived agency. Specifically, nonsupporters who viewed themselves as defeated helpers likely perceive they have a level of control over what happens in their life, whereas lost causes and do-nothings would perceive the world as "happening to them." This pattern is particularly problematic for the defeated helper identity as they simultaneously cannot understand why the person in need does not take control of their lives and also experience internal frustration of not being able to control the actions of the person in need. Together, the lack of effort on the part of the person in need, combined with the inability to motivate the do-nothing or lost cause to address their stressors leads to a sense of frustration. Thus, it is likely that many defeated helpers, at some point, concede defeat and choose to no longer support the person in need, labeling them a lost cause. These findings suggest that narratives are not only constructed for the sake of promoting a positive view of oneself, but often are created in conjunction with identities created for others that complement the self-identities that one creates.

Another important question to consider is why people create identities and narratives during moments of nonsupport in the first place. One answer is that it appears that people are aware that withholding support is a violation of norms (Rook, 1987; Wentowski, 1981) that might lead to negative perceptions, such as appearing uncaring or socially incompetent. Although it is also likely that some outside observers of these instances of nonsupport would agree with the nonsupporter's decision to withhold support, breaking the norms surrounding supporting close others is a decision that often requires justification. Consequently, those who withhold support use narratives

to construct identities for themselves and the other person to provide an account of their actions (or lack thereof) in terms of communicating support.

Finally, we also note that, for researchers, there is value in investigating the co-occurrence between the narrator and other-constructed identities. Indeed, by examining the co-occurrence of these identities via a co-occurrence matrix and examining the matrix for instances of co-occurrence, we were able to illustrate the ways narrators were able to maintain their positive face by either constructing themselves as victims or heroes and by shifting the responsibility of providing support elsewhere. To do so, we expanded (2018) recommendation to use matrices for data visualization to create a co-occurrence matrix and advanced Riessman's (2008) thematic narrative analysis and Scharp's (2021) thematic co-occurrence analysis to include a comparative component. In doing so, we provide a pathway for future researchers to compare identities while keeping stories intact and upholding the standards of interpretive scholarship. Next we consider the implications of this study in relation to supportive communication research.

Implications for Supportive Communication Research

This study has important implications for supportive communication researchers, specifically those who engage in theorizing and model-building. If applying the adage that *one cannot not communicate*, then most models and theories of supportive communication do not account for what a would-be supporter's silence (i.e., nonsupport) communicates to a person in need. Models of social support and supportive communication often assume that a supportive message will be communicated. As examples, the optimal matching model (Cutrona & Russell, 1990) and the dual-process model of supportive communication (Burleson, 2009) both assume that support will be communicated or occur at all. Subsequent empirical tests of these theories and models have associated high-quality support with relational and health benefits and problematic support with negative outcomes. But support researchers have generally given less attention to issues regarding the decision to provide support. This study contributes to the literature on supportive communication by bringing attention to the complexities of deciding whether to communicate support and the ways people construct narratives to defend this decision.

Supportive interactions do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, they occur as a point (or multiple points) upon the longer timeline of the supporter-recipient relationship—a relationship that may be influenced by animosity over prior actions, feelings of inequity or abuse, or other relational residue that has accumulated over time. Indeed, many of the narratives herein mentioned such issues and brings to focus the importance of the history of the supporter-recipient relationship.

Furthermore, several of the narratives shared in this study challenge the idea that supporting others is obligatory, especially in intimate relationships such as familial relationships. This aligns with prior research that demonstrates that supporters who perceive their efforts as ineffective experience increases in frustration and decreases in sympathy for the person in need over time (Joiner, 2000). Supporters who feel their

efforts are routinely ignored are also less likely to remain interested in supporting the person in the future (Wong et al., 2007). Whereas these studies looked at instances of supporters' efforts being spurned and subsequently choosing not to provide further support, this study showed that in some instances people can feel frustrated or spurned by another person in general, and subsequently choose to not provide any support whenever a stressor arises for the person who has mistreated them.

Taken together, our findings illustrate the need for models and theories of supportive communication that look beyond the moment when supportive interactions occur. Supportive communication researchers and theorists' work should adequately account for the "social" aspect of social support by accounting for the often-complex relational histories between potential supporters and recipients. This is particularly true for message effects studies that often employ researcher-created hypothetical messages that participants are told to imagine being communicated to them by someone they know. Next, we turn our attention to the practical implications of these findings.

Practical Implications

An important practical implication of these findings is for nonsupporters to reflect on the role they play in the problematic patterns they might identify in those they view as undeserving of support. For example, nonsupporters might have people in their life who they view as egotists and might accordingly view themselves as burdened givers. However, if an egotist over time becomes less self-centered, apologizes for their prior actions, and begins demonstrating reciprocity, the burdened giver could be too quick to dismiss these changes or willingly ignore the egotist's efforts as a way to maintain their burdened giver identity. Likewise, a defeated helper who has a "savior complex" might wish to continue constructing the other person as a lost cause, even if that person eventually develops a sense of agency in their own life. Although many people constructed as undeserving of support continue their problematic behaviors throughout their life (i.e., the "do nothing" who ultimately never does anything), many people also change over time. In close relationships that continue for decades, some people will experience changes in their orientation toward stressors, their perceived ability to address problems in their lives, and how to manage their relationships with those who offer support. That is, the stories that are told to others might serve us well but might also prevent us from recognizing how people mature, progress, and change over the course of a long-term, close relationship. In the future, researchers should consider how both self and other identities not only change over time but might vary based on where people are in the course of their lives.

Alternatively, based on these stories and the identities people construct for themselves and others, people might want to engage in relational distancing. Friends might fade away or lose touch over time; romantic partners might decide to break-up, or family members might decide to become estranged (see Scharp, 2019). Specifically, Scharp (2019) argues that family estrangement can be a healthy solution to an unhealthy environment, and people in these narratives might consider constructing a

variety of boundaries that facilitate a healthier relationship holistically or even just a less toxic environment for themselves.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with any empirical research endeavor, the present study had limitations that restrict the generalizability and applicability of these findings to only specific groups of people; however, many of these limitations can also act as catalysts for future studies. For one, we begin by noting that we did not collect data on gender identity, instead only collecting data on participants' self-reported biological sex. It is likely that the experiences of those who are not cisgender were underrepresented or not represented in this study. Furthermore, with 75% of the sample reporting their biological sex as female, the identities discussed herein may under-represent perspectives on withholding support held by those whose biological sex is male.

Similar concerns should be raised concerning other demographics of our participants. With half of the participants identifying as White, the perspectives of racial minorities, although present, may not have prominently factored into the identities that were noted in our findings. Finally, all 28 participants were from the United States or currently lived in the United States. As noted by Afifi and Cornejo (2020) this is a common issue in interpersonal communication research—with people from Western, Education, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies being overrepresented in interpersonal scholarship. Consequently, we readily note that perspectives of those from non-WEIRD societies are not represented in our findings and therefore caution any extrapolation of these findings to those from non-WEIRD cultures. These shortcomings in sample representativeness do, however, provide opportunities for future directions. In the future, researchers can validate the identities presented in this study by examining if the same identities are constructed in the narratives told by those from non-WEIRD societies. Cultures with a stronger emphasis on collectivism might frame their nonsupport decisions in different ways by constructing different identities than those created by this study's sample.

Another limitation is that our interviews yielded only one side of the story. Researchers could better understand the use of narratives and nonsupport by interviewing multiple people who are involved in the same situation (i.e., having each character in the story provide a narrative from their perspective). In particular, the narratives shared by those who did not receive support could provide insight into whether they believed they deserved support and how they view the absence of support. Those narratives could also shed light on the experiences and outcomes associated with having someone refuse to provide support or arrive at the decision to cut off support. Finally, these narratives could also provide insight as to whether those who are not supported accurately perceive why the other person is not supporting them and what the unsupported feel are "good reasons" for not providing support.

Additionally, interviewing those who are a third party to the relationship between the nonsupporter and the person needing support (e.g., a mutual friend) could provide insight into the potential stigmatization that may surround withholding support. Such

interviews could explore how outsiders view the decision to withhold support as either justified or not, and researchers can look at the consequences of withholding support for the nonsupporter's relationships with others besides the person undeserving of support. After all, Ray et al. (2019) noted examples in which people were viewed as undeserving of support because of how they treated others in the past when faced with their own stressors. Perhaps a cycle develops in which one person withholding support from another becomes grounds for others withholding support from the nonsupporter when they are faced with their own problems.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

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

ORCID iDs

Colter D. Ray https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0491-1517

Kristina M. Scharp https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9280-6313

References

Afifi, W. A., & Cornejo, M. (2020). #CommSoWEIRD. In M. L. Doerfel & J. L. Gibbs (Eds.), *Organizing inclusion: Moving diversity from demographics to communication processes*. Routledge.

Amado, S., Snyder, H. R., & Gutchess, A. (2020). Mind the gap: The relation between identity gaps and depression symptoms in cultural adaptation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*(1156), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01156

Barker, B. A., Scharp, K. M., Long, S., & Ritter, C. (2020). Narratives of identity: Understanding the experience of adults with hearing loss who use hearing aids. *International Journal of Audiology*, *59*(3), 186–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/14992027.2019.1683626

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Prentice-Hall.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*, 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Burleson, B. R. (2009). Understanding the outcomes of supportive communication: A dual-process approach. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *26*(1), 21–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407509105519

Burleson, B. R., & Goldsmith, D. J. (1998). How the comforting process works: Alleviating emotional distress through conversationally induced reappraisals. In P. A. Andersen & L. K. Guerrero (Eds.), *Handbook of communication and emotion: Research, theory, applications, and contexts* (pp. 245–280). Academic Press.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. SAGE.

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). John Wiley & Sons.

Dakof, G. A., & Taylor, S. E. (1990). Victims' perceptions of social support: What is helpful from whom? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *58*(1), 80–90. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.1.80

Dunkel-Schetter, C., & Skokan, L. A. (1990). Determinants of social support provision in personal relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *7*(4), 437–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407590074002

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.

Haslam, S. A., Jetten, J., Postmes, T., & Haslam, C. (2009). Social identity, health and well-being: An emerging agenda for applied psychology. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, *58*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2008.00379.x

Joiner, T. E. (2000). Depression's vicious scree: Self-propagating and erosive processes in depression. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, *7*(2), 203–218. https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.7.2.203

Kidder, L. H. (1981). Qualitative research and quasi-experimental frameworks. In B. Brewer & B. Collins (Eds.), *Scientific inquiry and the social sciences* (pp. 380–382). Jossey-Bass.

Lac, A., & Donaldson, C. D. (2020). Development and validation of the drama triangle scale: Are you a victim, rescuer, or persecutor? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *37*(7–8), NP4057–NP4081. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520957696

Langellier, K. M. (1989). Personal narratives: Perspectives on theory and research. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *9*(4), 243–276. https://doi.org/10.1080/10462938909365938

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984) *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.

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). SAGE.

McAdams, D. (2006). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by*. Oxford University Press.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2018). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.) Sage.

Owen, W. F. (1984). Interpretive themes in relational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *70*(3), 274–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383697

Ray, C. D., Manusov, V., & McLaren, R. M. (2019). "Emotional support won't cure cancer": Reasons people give for not providing emotional support. *Western Journal of Communication*, *83*(1), 20–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2018.1472800

Ray, C. D., & Veluscek, A. M. (2017). Face threats and additional reasons for perceiving support as unwanted: A study of recently diagnosed cancer patients. *Health Communication*, *32*(11), 1260–1276. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2016.1228027

Ray, C. D., & Veluscek, A. M. (2018). Nonsupport versus varying levels of person-centered emotional support: A study of women with breast cancer. *Journal of Cancer Education*, *33*(3), 649–652. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13187-016-1125-z

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. SAGE.

Rook, K. S. (1987). Reciprocity and social exchange and social satisfaction among older women. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *52*(1), 145–154. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.1.145

Scharp, K. M. (2019). "You're not welcome here:" A grounded theory of family distancing. *Communication Research*, *46*(4), 427–455. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650217715542

Scharp, K. M. (2021). Thematic co-occurrence analysis: Advancing a theory and qualitative method to illuminate ambivalent experiences. *Journal of Communication*, *75*, 545–571. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab015

Scharp, K. M., & Beck, A. L. (2017). "Losing my religion": Identity (re)constructions in Mormon exit narratives. *Narrative Inquiry*, *27*(1), 132–148. https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.27.1.07sch

Scharp, K. M., & Dorrance Hall, E. (2019). Reconsidering family closeness: A review and call for research on family distancing. *Journal of Family Communication*, *19*(1), 1–14. https://doi:10.1080/15267431.2018.1544563

Scharp, K. M., Seiter, J., & Maughan, M. (2020). "My mom always tells that story to friends and relatives": Exploring the phenomenon of other presentation. *Journal of Family Communication*, *20*(2), 46–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2020.1739689

Scharp, K. M., & Thomas, L. J. (2016). Family "bonds": Making meaning of parent–child relationships in estrangement narratives. *Journal of Family Communication*, *16*(1), 32–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2015.1111215

Sharp, K. M., Thomas, L. J., & Paxman, C. G. (2015). "It was the straw that broke the camel's back": Exploring the distancing processes communicatively constructed in parent-child estrangement backstories. *Journal of Family Communication*, *15*(4), 330-348. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2015.1076422

Scharp, K. M., Wang, T. R., & Wolfe, B. H. (2022). Communicative resilience of first-generation college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Human Communication Research*, *48*(1), 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqab018.

Schwarzer, R., & Weiner, B. (1991). Stigma controllability and coping as predictors of emotions and social support. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *8*(1), 133–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407591081007

Scranton, A. (2015). "I won't change who I am for anyone": Muslim women's narrative identities. *Narrative Inquiry*, *25*(1), 148–165. https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.25.1.09scr

Thomas, L. J. (2014). "Once a foster child . . .": Identity construction in former foster children's narratives. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, *15*(1), 84–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2014.955596

Tian, X., Solomon, D. H., & St. Cyr Brisini, K. (2020). How the comforting process fails: Psychological reactance to support messages. *Journal of Communication*, *70*(1), 13–24. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz040

Wentowski, G. J. (1981). Reciprocity and the coping strategies of older people: Cultural dimensions of network building. *The Gerontologist*, *21*(6), 600–609. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/21.6.600

Wong, K. S., Cheuk, W. H., & Rosen, S. (2007). Experience of being spurned: Coping style, stress preparation, and depersonalization in beginning kindergarten teachers. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *22*(2), 141–154. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568540709594618

Williams, J. M., & Bryan, J. (2013). Overcoming adversity: High-achieving African American youth's perspectives on educational resilience. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *91*(3), 291–300. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2013.00097.x

Author Biographies

Colter D. Ray (PhD, Arizona State University) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Louisiana State University. His primary area of research explores the ways that supportive communication goes awry following a cancer diagnosis, as well as times when people avoid communicating support when support was expected (i.e., nonsupport). His research also investigates how the experience of loneliness may inhibit compassion towards marginalized and suffering social groups.

Kristina M. Scharp (PhD, University of Iowa) is an associate professor in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University. Her research meets at the intersection of interpersonal, family, and health communication with a particular focus on difficutly family transitions and the process of marginalization. She most often examines marginalization in the contexts of relational/family distancing, complicated health diagnoses, and disenfranchised student populations.

Emily L. Parker (MS, University of Essex) is a doctoral student in the psychology program at California Southern University and previously worked as a clinical assistant at Mental Health Liaison NHS England in the United Kingdom.

Dana Donohoe (M.A., University of Washington) is a former graduate student researcher at the University of Washington. Her research primarily focuses on online social support in culturally and linguistically diverse social media communities.