

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND RECIPROCITY: A CROSS-ETHNIC AND CROSS- NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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This cross-national study examined the perception of reciprocity in support relationships and the degree to which reciprocity predicts life satisfaction. Comparisons of white and black American elderly with elderly from south-western France indicate cultural differences. The French are much more likely to perceive their support relationships as reciprocal and very unlikely to report receiving less support than they provide. Among elderly white Americans, age, lower educational levels and functional limitations are associated with not perceiving support relationships as reciprocal. The pattern is similar but not significant among black Americans. French elderly with more functional limitations report that they receive less than they provide, whereas those who are married are more likely to report that their relations are reciprocal. Comparisons of white and black Americans over the full adult age range reveal that for white Americans, age, education, functional limitations, and marital status are important factors predicting reciprocity in social relations; for black Americans again the pattern is similar, but only functional limitations and marital status significantly predict reciprocity. Generally, reciprocal relationships are most positively related to life satisfaction in comparison to both receiving more or receiving less support in white and black American adults and American and French elderly.

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A great deal of research in the past 10 years has focused on the concept of social support (Antonucci, 1985, 1990). Social support has been documented as having positive effects on health and well-being (Cohen & Syme, 1985). A closer examination of this literature, however, reveals that the effects are not all positive (Wallston et al., 1983). Recently noted is the lack of knowledge concerning the processes and mechanisms through which social support is effective. This paper suggests that a broad perspective is needed within which to understand and interpret social support and social relations. We suggest that the concept of reciprocity may provide an important explanatory framework within which to interpret diverse findings concerning the effect of social support on health and well-being. The present research represents an empirical investigation of this relationship and is an extension of previous work (Antonucci & Jackson, 1989, 1990).

Two approaches to the study of reciprocity have been applied to the study of social relationships. The first is an adaptation of exchange theory and suggests that individuals prefer equal exchanges. If one receives more than one provides, one feels overbenefitted; on the other hand, if one provides more than one receives, one then feels underbenefitted. In the case of underbenefitting, people tend to feel as though they are being taken advantage of; whereas in the case of overbenefitting people feel indebted. Both positions are seen by exchange theorists as being uncomfortable. More recently, Dowd (1984) has taken a slightly different perspective by considering reciprocity at different stages in the life course. He argues that younger people in American society tend to have the resources, power and prestige which are most desirable and most likely to be exchanged. Older people, on the other hand, do not, putting them in the position of relying on the 'beneficence' of younger people.

We agree with Dowd that a long-term perspective is important. We suggest, however, that social support be considered within the larger framework of social exchanges over the life course. Social relations develop over the individual's life and have a cumulative impact on how one manages specific experiences and expectations (Levitt, in press). The young may have more resources in some sense than the old, but they engage in exchanges which are meant to be both immediately reciprocated and reciprocated over the long term. If social support is viewed as a resource about which people have long-term views (Hobfoll, 1988) a slightly different perspec-

tive on the exchanges of these resources might emerge. Antonucci (1985, 1990) has used the concept of a 'support bank' to suggest that individuals maintain a general accounting of their interactions with others. It is not suggested that this accounting system is malicious or even particularly pejorative. Rather, it is suggested that the norm of reciprocity is so strong that people tend to keep track of the degree to which they provide support to and receive support from others. We propose that the purpose of this accounting is not so much to make sure that one is provided with what one is 'due', in the language of equity theorists to avoid being underbenefitted (Roberto, 1989), but rather to enable an individual to continue to be positive about relationships even when that individual is consistently on the receiving end of support exchanges, i.e. is consistently overbenefitted. A support bank provides a mechanism through which individuals can benefit both in the long- and short-term from their interactions with others. Benefits derive not only from the specific exchange of goods, services and affection but also from the accumulating knowledge of long-term interactions with others. This permits one to derive positive benefit from providing to others both because of the satisfaction of providing support to others and also because of the knowledge that support can be expected, if needed, at some future time.

The research reported in this paper also explored cultural characteristics of perceived reciprocity in social relations. Accepting that the norm of reciprocity is very strong, we explore the degree to which age and other sociodemographic variables such as education, gender and marital status affect this norm. We speculate that the norm of reciprocity is high in most cultures but that the degree to which relations are seen as reciprocal may be affected by specific life circumstances and cultural beliefs. Thus, some cultures may value reciprocity more than others and the perception of reciprocity might be more affected by sociodemographic variables in some cultures than in others. We have the opportunity to examine this question empirically among white and black Americans and among the elderly in south-western France. Cross-national differences will be explored to examine the degree to which French elderly are similar in their perceptions of reciprocity in comparisons to black and white American elderly. Among Americans the degree to which blacks and whites differ in perceptions of reciprocity in their social relations will also be explored. It has been noted that many sociodemographic characteristics associated with elderly whites,

e.g. being less well educated, less likely to be married, and a greater number of functional limitations are often associated with blacks over the entire life course. Consequently, the pattern of reciprocal exchanges with others might vary. Whites might perceive themselves as spending most of their young adult years providing support to others who are both younger and older than they are. On the other hand, blacks might experience reciprocity in a much more contemporaneous fashion, that is, giving and receiving support at all ages based on the current availability of support to provide to others in need or the experience of receiving support because it is needed. This paper also examines the effects of the perception of support relations as reciprocal on life satisfaction. In summary, differences are explored among black and white Americans and French elderly in (1) the perception of reciprocity in supportive exchanges, (2) the factors which predict the perception of supportive exchanges as reciprocal and (3) the degree to which perceived reciprocity predicts an individual's feelings of well-being.

Method

Sample

Data were drawn from two separate studies. The American data were drawn from the study of Americans' Changing Lives (ACL), a national representative study of 3617 men and women 25 years of age and over living in the conterminous USA. The sample was drawn using multi-stage sampling techniques (Kish, 1965) and over-sampled for blacks and the elderly. Data were collected in 1988, during face-to-face 90-minute interviews conducted by trained interviewers of the Survey Research Center (see Herzog et al., 1989, for a more detailed description of the sample). Analyses of the American sample were conducted on weighted data, adjusting the sample size to that proportionate to the actual numbers in the population. Data were also taken from the French PAQUID (Projet AQUItaine Demence) study, a longitudinal, prospective study of a regional sample of elderly. The representative regional sample of 2800 non-institutionalized people 65 years of age and older, was drawn using electoral registers and stratified by size of community, sex and age group (Fuhrer et al., 1989). Older people living in the south-western (Bordeaux) region of France were interviewed in their homes by masters' level psychologists who were trained specifically for this study. Although the two larger studies from which these data were drawn did not have identical purposes, the questions concerning reciprocity and well-being in the two studies were specifically designed to be directly parallel.

Measures

Questions from both studies covered a broad range of topics and only a select portion of the questions are reported in these analyses. Each of the questions used in the present analyses is described below.

Reciprocity. The reciprocity question in the ACL and the PAQUID studies are directly parallel. In the ACL study, respondents were asked, 'Right now would you say you provide more support, advice, and help to your (spouse, mother, father, child and friend) in your support network, is it about equal, or does he/she provide more to you?' The responses were averaged for these analyses. The French version of the question is 'En réfléchissant aux échanges que vous avez eu avec les personnes de votre entourage ces derniers temps, diriez-vous que . . . Vous avez donné plus aux autres que vous n'avez reçu d'eux; Vous avez donné autant que vous avez reçu; Vous avez donné moins que vous n'avez reçu?' ('Thinking about the exchanges you have with the people in your network right now, would you say that you give more than you receive, you give as much as you receive, it's about equal, or you give less than you receive?'). In most analyses, the responses to these questions were dummied so that 'receives more support than provides' was compared with reciprocal relations as the excluded category and, similarly, 'receives less support than provides' was compared with reciprocal relations as the excluded category.

Life satisfaction. The life satisfaction question is also very similar in both studies. In the ACL study, the life satisfaction question is 'Thinking about your life as a whole, how satisfied are you with your life in general? Using a 7-point scale with 7 as completely satisfied and 1 as completely dissatisfied, which number would you choose?' The French version of this question is 'Êtes-vous en general satisfait(e) de votre vie actuelle?' The same 7-point scale was used in the French study.

Demographic and other independent measures. Age was measured as a continuous variable. Education was assessed as the level or years of education completed. Region was measured in a slightly different fashion in the two samples. For the ACL sample a dummy variable was created using north-east, north-central, west and south, with the latter category as the excluded one. Since the PAQUID study is a regional one, this variable was constructed as Bordeaux and other urban or suburban areas contrasted with rural areas which was the excluded variable in the PAQUID analyses. The Activities of Daily Living Scale (ADL) (Katz et al., 1963) is an index of functional limitations among normal activities such as being bedridden, bathing, climbing stairs, walking, doing heavy work. The scale is additive so that a higher score suggests greater limitations. Marital status was assessed as a dichotomous variable, with all non-married categories representing the excluded category. Sex was also dichotomized to permit the creation of a dummy variable in the regression analyses. Male was the excluded category.

Results and discussion

We begin with simple descriptive statistics, examining the numbers and proportions of people reporting that they receive less support than they provide, that their support exchanges are reciprocal, and that they receive more than they provide. The second set of analyses

explores those factors which predict the perception of support exchanges as reciprocal. Logit analyses were conducted predicting respondents who 'receive less support than provide' vs those who have 'reciprocal exchanges'; and predicting those who 'receive more support than provide' vs those having 'reciprocal exchanges'. Age, education, urbanicity/region, functional limitations (assessed as ADL score), marital status and gender were the independent variables. The third set of analyses explored the role of reciprocity and sociodemographic variables on life satisfaction. American and French elderly are considered first, followed by a discussion of adult Americans from age 25 to 97. Among the Americans, all analyses are conducted for whites and blacks separately.

TABLE 1
Reciprocity

	US whites		Ages 65+ US blacks		French	
	65-74	75-97	65-74	75-97	65-74	75-97
Rec. less	126 (38%)	58 (27%)	15 (47%)	7 (37%)	53 (4%)	48 (4%)
Equal	154 (46%)	105 (48%)	12 (36%)	8 (37%)	790 (59%)	766 (63%)
Rec. more	51 (15%)	54 (25%)	5 (15%)	5 (26%)	502 (37%)	406 (33%)
	US whites — all ages					
	27-39	40-9	50-64	65-74	75-97	Total
Rec. less	291 (35%)	319 (62%)	278 (57%)	126 (38%)	58 (27%)	1073 (42%)
Equal	311 (37%)	133 (26%)	172 (35%)	154 (46%)	105 (48%)	875 (37%)
Rec. more	239 (28%)	63 (12%)	43 (9%)	51 (15%)	54 (25%)	449 (19%)
	US blacks — all ages					
Rec. less	36 (34%)	42 (63%)	42 (55%)	15 (47%)	7 (37%)	142 (47%)
Equal	37 (35%)	15 (23%)	21 (28%)	12 (36%)	8 (37%)	92 (31%)
Rec. more	33 (31%)	9 (13%)	13 (17%)	5 (15%)	5 (26%)	65 (22%)

Descriptive statistics

The figures presented in Table 1 represent the degree to which a national sample of white and black Americans ages 25 to 97, and a south-western regional sample of French people over 65 years of age perceive their relationships as reciprocal. White and black American and French elderly will be considered first, followed by a consideration of white and black Americans across the adult age range. As examination of Table 1 indicates, one striking finding is that a much higher proportion (over 60 percent) of French elderly in comparison to both white and black elderly Americans (about 60 vs 40 percent respectively) view their relationships as reciprocal.

Among the French elderly, it is highly unlikely for anyone to report that they receive less than they provide (only 4 percent). Elderly white and black Americans, however, are much more likely to report receiving less than they provide (whites aged 65–74: 38 percent; aged 75–97: 27 percent; blacks aged 65–74: 47 percent; aged 75–97: 37 percent). Examination of Table 1 also indicates that both white and black American elderly are much less likely to report receiving more from others (between 15 and 26 percent) than French elderly (approximately 35 percent). In sum, these data suggest possible cultural differences in the French and American elderly's perceptions of the degree of reciprocity in their relationships. The French tend to see their relationships as reciprocal, and if not reciprocal, they perceive themselves as receiving more than they give. Although older American respondents are also most likely to report that their relationships are reciprocal, among those who do not American elderly are those more likely to report that they receive less than they provide to their social networks.

The availability of American data for whites and blacks across a wider range of adult age groups allows a cross-sectional examination of the perception of social exchanges among Americans. The bottom portion of Table 1 indicates that both white and black middle-aged people (ages 40–49 and 50–64) are more likely to perceive themselves as providing more to their support networks than either of the other two categories (i.e. receiving as much as they provide or receiving more than they provide). One interesting difference can be observed among the 65–74 year olds in comparison to other age groups. Whites in this age group report their relationships to be more reciprocal than blacks, whereas blacks are more likely than whites to report that they receive less than they provide from their support network. One explanation for this divergence, which is consistent but not quite as striking in the oldest category, is that older blacks are more likely to continue providing to others in their support network, even as they age. Since they have consistently provided more than they have received, as their resources become more limited the proportion of black elderly who report reciprocal relations increases. Whites perceive themselves at almost all ages as receiving less than they provide. Perhaps the greater availability of resources to whites of all ages makes it possible to maintain this type of underbenefitting relationships, especially with respect to family members. The next set of analyses examines those factors which are associated with whether individ-

uals perceive themselves as receiving more, less or about equal amounts of support from their social relationships.

Predicting reciprocity

Table 2 presents the logit regression analyses. This procedure was chosen because it is specifically designed to be used with dichotomous dependent variables. In this case the dichotomous dependent variables were 'receives more support than provides' as compared with 'reciprocal' exchanges; and 'receives less support than provides' as compared with 'reciprocal' exchanges. Logistic analyses provide a χ^2 test of significance. Again white and black American and French elderly are examined first, followed by a consideration of the American cross-section of white and black adults from 25 years of age.

Among both white and black American elderly none of the sociodemographic variables significantly distinguish those who felt they receive less than they provide from those who felt that their relations were reciprocal. Among the French elderly those who report that they receive less support than they provide have significantly fewer functional limitations and are less likely to be married. In the examination of white elderly Americans who report receiving more support than they provide, people who are older, people with less education and people with more functional limitations are significantly more likely to indicate that they receive more support than they provide. Among black American elderly the pattern was similar but, because of the smaller weighted sample size, the overall logit analysis was not statistically significant. French elderly who report that they receive more support than they provide had less education and were more likely to live in rural areas.

The bottom portion of Table 2 presents data for white and black Americans of all ages. White Americans with higher levels of education and who are married are more likely to report that they receive less support than they provide. Among black Americans, only being married is related to the perception that less support is received than provided. In the comparison of people who feel they receive more than they provide, younger white Americans (in this analysis, beginning with people from 25 years of age) are less likely to report that they receive more than they provide, whereas people with higher ADL scores, that is, more functional limitations, are more likely to report that they receive more than they provide. Functional limitations are also significantly related to receiving

TABLE 2
Logit regressions predicting reciprocity^a

	USA				French	
	Whites — 65+		Blacks — 65+		65+	
	Rec. less	Rec. more	Rec. less	Rec. more	Rec. less	Rec. more
Age	-0.04	0.04**	-0.04	0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Education	0.02	-0.09**	0.03	-0.02	0.10	-0.14**
Urban/region	-0.26	0.08	0.29	0.30	-0.01	-0.15**
ADL	0.13	0.32**	-0.02	0.61	0.26**	0.02
Married	0.32	-0.21	0.34	-0.56	-0.28**	0.00
Gender	-0.31	0.01	-0.06	0.36	-0.08	0.00
χ^2	13.54*	28.28**	1.47	5.59	16.71*	20.54**

	USA			
	Whites — all ages		Blacks — all ages	
	Rec. less	Rec. more	Rec. less	Rec. more
Age	-0.01	-0.02**	0.01	-0.02
Education	0.03**	-0.02	0.09	0.02
Urban/region	-0.10	0.00	-0.13	0.03
ADL	0.03	0.40**	-0.10	0.44**
Married	0.51**	-0.08	0.69**	-0.46
Gender	-0.02	0.07	-0.15	-0.55
χ^2	37.13**	42.37**	11.95	10.67

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

^a Receive less support compared with reciprocal support; receive more support compared with reciprocal support.

more support than one provides among blacks of all ages. All χ^2 analyses of whites and French elderly were statistically significant. These findings lend support to the perspective that an individual's perception of support relationships is attenuated by sociodemographic variables, such as age and functional limitations, as well as by the availability of life-long resources.

TABLE 3
Life satisfaction

	USA		French 65+	USA	
	Whites 65+	Blacks 65+		Whites All ages	Blacks All ages
Rec. less	-0.23*	0.20	-0.37*	0.07	-0.10
Rec. more	-0.33*	-0.33	-0.39**	-0.21*	-0.06
Age	0.02*	0.02	0.01	0.01**	0.03**
Education	-0.03	-0.01	0.05	-0.01	0.01
Urban/region	0.23*	0.34	0.15*	0.13*	0.01
ADL	-0.24**	-0.08	-0.25**	-0.30**	-0.30**
Married	0.34**	-0.18	0.27**	0.46**	0.20
Gender	0.05	-0.13	-0.14*	0.07	-0.22*
R^2	0.04	0.01	0.05	0.06	0.08
F-value	5.17**	1.48 NS	16.22**	14.64**	9.73**

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Reciprocity and well-being

The final set of analyses, presented in Table 3, examined the degree to which perceived reciprocity and the sociodemographic variables of age, education, urbanicity/region, ADL, marital status and gender predicted reported life satisfaction. Reciprocity was again represented by two dummy variables. People who report receiving more support than they provide were compared with those who report reciprocal relations, as were people who report receiving less support than they provide. In both cases the excluded category was reciprocal exchanges. We discuss the elderly samples first. White American and French elderly who report receiving less support than they provide or receiving more support than they provide have lower levels of life satisfaction; the highest levels of life satisfaction are associated with those who perceive their support relationships to be reciprocal. In this sample of elderly white Americans, older people are more satisfied with life than younger people. Older white American and French elderly indicate that living in less rural areas, having fewer functional limitations and being married are associated with higher levels of life satisfaction than living in rural areas, having many functional limitations or not being married. French men, though not American men, also report higher levels of life satisfaction than French women. The parallel regression equation was not significant for older American blacks, although the pattern of coefficients is similar.

Analyses among white and black Americans of all ages indicate that receiving less than one provides compared to reciprocal relations is not related to life satisfaction. Whites who receive more than they provide are less satisfied with life than people who feel their relationships are reciprocal. Reciprocity is not significantly related to life satisfaction among blacks. In this analysis of all adult ages, older people, people with higher functional capacity (i.e. with lower ADL scores), whites who are married and do not live in the South, and black men have higher levels of life satisfaction.

These findings indicate that perceptions of reciprocity influence life satisfaction and well-being among older white Americans and French elderly. In all cases, the perception of reciprocal social exchanges was associated with higher life satisfaction. We can only speculate about the degree to which this assessment of relationships as reciprocal is based on life-long interactions and social exchanges. However, the evidence indicates that older people who perceive their relationships as reciprocal are more satisfied with life. The

perception of relations as reciprocal can, at least tentatively, be seen as one pathway to successful aging (Antonucci & Jackson, 1989). Older people who feel that they must provide more to others than they receive might feel their supportive others are not successful because they are in need; similarly, if they receive more than they provide they may assess their own situation negatively since they are required to accept help from others. Thus, both overbenefitting and underbenefitting in social relations is evaluated negatively. It is interesting that this pattern is consistently true for both white American and French elderly (the overall regression was not significant for black Americans), providing some support for the theoretical proposition that the perception of reciprocal social relations might be one path to successful aging.

It should be noted that these findings are preliminary. The samples, while extraordinarily rich, are not exactly comparable. The American data are based on a national sample, whereas the French data are only regional. Similarly, although the French questions are almost exact translations of the English, much research has shown that literal translations may not convey the same meaning in two different cultures. Nevertheless, the substantially greater number of French elderly compared to American elderly reporting that their relationships are reciprocal and the significantly fewer French elderly compared to American elderly reporting that they receive less support than they provide, suggests that there is a pattern of cultural differences. In addition, the comparison of white and black Americans and the differences in perceptions of the degree to which their relationships are reciprocal, suggests that the greater availability of resources may have long-term effects on social exchanges.

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