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The Role of Perceived Similarity in Supportive  
Responses to Victims of Negative Life Events

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Abstract

We examined whether subjects' perceived similarity to an ostensible victim of a negative life event influenced their supportiveness during a "live" interaction. We considered two competing models: (a) increased similarity would be associated with *increased* supportiveness through attraction to the target, and (b) increased similarity would be associated with *decreased* supportiveness through anxiety (due to heightened vulnerability). Participants (N = 241) met individually with a confederate posing as a cancer patient. Reactions were assessed, including verbal and nonverbal behaviors, both before and after the interaction, by participants themselves and by observers of the interaction. Results supported a model based on the classic similarity/attraction paradigm: perceived similarity indirectly predicted participant-reported supportiveness/warmth and smiling through its relationship to attraction. Results extend the literature on similarity and attraction to the stress and coping arena and suggest that emphasizing perceived similarities to victims would be beneficial.

KEYWORDS: ATTRACTION, CANCER, COPING, HELPING, SIMILARITY, SOCIAL SUPPORT

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Socially supportive interactions and relationships are important in facilitating adjustment when individuals are victimized by traumatic events such as debilitating illness, disease, or injury (e.g., Norris & Kaniasty, 1996). Indeed, a large body of literature has documented the beneficial effects of social relationships on psychological and physical health (Cohen, 2004; House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). The ability of socially supportive interactions to buffer the subjective and physiological effects of stress has also been demonstrated experimentally in a number of studies (see Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996, for a review). However, although friends and family can be effective support providers (cf. Dakof & Taylor, 1990), problems may arise in the support process between victims and intimates.<sup>1</sup> Providers may become emotionally over-involved or intrusive, feel overly responsible and distressed by the victim's plight, or feel burdened or exhausted by having to consistently provide physical or psychological care (Coyne, Wortman, & Lehman, 1988; Dunkel-Schetter & Wortman, 1982). If and when this occurs, victims of negative life events may look to others to fulfill unmet support needs, either in the context of support groups (Taylor, Falke, Mazel, & Hilsberg, 1988), or by forming relationships with acquaintances or strangers (cf. Silver & Urbanowicz, 1999). However, non-intimates' reactions may be a function of their own attributes or those of the victim. These include the victim's level of distress (Silver et al., 1990), the gender of the victim or interaction partner (Trobst, Collins, & Embree, 1994; Yee, Greenberg, & Beach, 1998), the coping strategies a victim conveys (Schwarzer & Weiner, 1991; Yee et al., 1998), interaction partners' dispositional empathy (Trobst et al., 1994), their previous experience with stressors

(Dunkel-Schetter & Skokan, 1990), and their perceived similarity to the victim (Feldman, Ullman, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1998).

Although the studies mentioned above provide information on conditions or factors that enhance support provision, not all of the factors identified in this research translate to practical advice that can be incorporated by victims in their interactions with others. For example, the Silver et al. study (1990) found that victims are most likely to be perceived positively if they present themselves as coping moderately well and as experiencing a relatively low amount of distress. However, to the extent that such portrayals are discrepant with a victim's actual feelings and coping abilities, there may be a psychological cost of "acting" one way but feeling differently. False self-presentations may interfere with effective coping or lead others to respond in ways that do not provide support sought or needed (Silver et al., 1990). Other variables such as a provider's dispositional empathy, or previous experience with negative life events, can lead to supportive interactions only to the extent that victims seek out individuals who possess high levels of these attributes.

Of all the factors investigated above, perceived similarity to the victim is one that appears to be relatively easy for a victim to capitalize on, either by emphasizing his or her similarity or by seeking out others who are similar. There are two competing theoretical models, however, for how similarity should operate to influence the supportiveness of responses to victims. According to the similarity/attraction paradigm, similarity increases attraction, which should in turn facilitate supportive behaviors. Since the 1960s, a substantial body of social psychological research has demonstrated that similarity in attitudes increases attraction, whereas dissimilarity reduces attraction (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Byrne & Nelson, 1965; Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986; Pilkington & Lydon, 1997; Simpson & Harris, 1994; Singh & Teoh, 1999; Smeaton, Byrne, &

Murnen, 1989). According to Byrne and Clore (1967), similar others validate and legitimize one's views of the world and satisfy the need for order, accuracy, and consistency in interpreting the world. This need or motive is referred to as *effectance* and satisfaction of this basic motive is reinforcing, leading to positive affect and attraction. Dissimilar others, however, threaten the self-concept by questioning the accuracy and legitimacy of one's attitudes, behaviors and feelings.

Subsequent to Byrne and colleagues' initial research, Rosenbaum (1986) proposed that previous associations between similarity and attraction could be attributed to perceptions of *dissimilarity* leading to *decreased* attraction (the "repulsion" hypothesis). Nevertheless, Rosenbaum conceded that there are conditions under which similarity should lead to attraction (e.g., when little is known about a target). Researchers have since identified other contextual factors that influence whether the degree of attraction experienced originates from perceptions of similarity, as opposed to dissimilarity (e.g., Chen & Kenrick, 2002; Pilkington & Lydon, 1997). In general, the similarity/attraction effect is pervasive and has been found across a variety of populations ranging from school children (Tan & Singh, 1995) to married couples (Russell & Wells, 1991), as well as for different types of information such as personality characteristics (Klohn & Luo, 2003), attitudes (Byrne & Clore, 1970), and physical attractiveness (Byrne, London & Reeves, 1968; Stevens, Owens, & Schaefer, 1990; Stroebe, Insko, Thompson & Layton, 1971). Thus by emphasizing one's similarity to others, whether in attitudes, personality, or other characteristics, a victim may be able to initiate interactions with others that maximize the likelihood of supportive responses (such as listening, empathizing etc.). In fact, research on helping behavior has demonstrated a greater propensity to help others who are more similar (cf. Batson & Shaw, 1991; Gray, Russell, & Blockley, 1991). Much of the helping literature,

however, has focused on instrumentally supportive behaviors (e.g., making a phone call for someone, donating a small amount of money) as opposed to emotionally supportive behaviors.

To date, only two studies have examined the role of perceived similarity in responses to victims. Dunkel-Schetter and Skokan (1990) found that others' prior experiences with specific stressful events predicted greater reported willingness to help a hypothetical victim. In addition, a study by Feldman, Ullman, and Dunkel-Schetter (1998) found that greater perceived similarity to a hypothetical victim in age and marital status predicted less blaming of the victim, which was associated with a greater reported willingness to be supportive. Both of these investigations, however, used hypothetical scenarios to describe the victim and asked participants to rate how supportive they thought they would be. In fact, with the exception of the study by Silver and colleagues (1990), all of the previously cited investigations on factors related to support to victims have used hypothetical scenarios to describe the victim, and have subsequently asked participants how willing they would be to provide support. It is possible, however, that individuals' behaviors in an actual interaction might differ from their projections in a scenario-based study.

In contrast to the similarity/attraction paradigm, similarity would be expected to produce a different pattern of responses according to the "victimization perspective" put forth by Wortman and colleagues (Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986; Wortman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1979). According to this perspective, it is sometimes difficult for others to be supportive during interactions with victims because of feelings of anxiety, helplessness, or vulnerability that the mere presence of a victim can engender in others. These negative emotional states are hypothesized to result in unsupportive responses such as avoidance, making unhelpful comments, or visibly demonstrating discomfort. Supporting this perspective is an experimental

study by Silver et al. (1990) in which participants who met with a cancer patient for the first time exhibited significantly greater discomfort and avoidance, and little desire for future interaction, compared to participants who met with a healthy (control) individual.

If interactions with victims are already anxiety-provoking, perceiving oneself as similar to a victim should exacerbate anxiety by making individuals feel vulnerable to the same fate. This should interfere with effective provision of support, leading to an opposite prediction from what would be expected from the similarity/attraction paradigm. That is, a victim who emphasizes her similarity to interaction partners runs the risk of alienating interaction partners by reminding them that the victimization might befall them as well. The result would be increased anxiety, and a decrease in the provision of emotionally supportive reactions.

In sum, the “victimization perspective” and the similarity/attraction paradigm offer competing views of how similarity should operate to influence the supportiveness of responses to victims. If on the one hand perceived similarity leads to attraction, then feeling attracted to a victim should be incompatible with derogation and other unsupportive responses, and instead facilitate positive reactions. On the other hand, feeling similar to a victim might lead to greater anxiety during an interaction, which should foster unsupportive responses such as wanting to avoid interacting with a victim, or expressing less warmth and supportiveness, either verbally or nonverbally, during the interaction. The present study aimed to test these two models for how similarity influences responses to a victim. Evidence for the similarity/attraction account would represent an important piece of knowledge for victims, as it may provide a mechanism for victims to initiate and sustain supportive interactions outside the contexts of support groups or family relationships, contexts that research has found to be important when support needs from intimates go unmet.

In addition to examining responses during an *actual* interaction, the present study improves on prior research by using multiple sources of ratings. In previous research, only self-reported supportive responses have been examined, but ratings from multiple sources would increase confidence in observed predictors of supportiveness. In the present study, we examined the role of perceived similarity in supportiveness to a purported victim who participants met for several minutes in a “live” interaction. We also obtained supportiveness ratings from several observers of the actual interaction.

Although the main focus of the present study is to examine competing models of the effects of similarity because of its practical importance for victims, the relationship between feeling sympathy and demonstrating support to a victim was also assessed. According to Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer, and Weiner’s attributional model of helping (2004), when people are confronted with others’ misfortune, a determination of the victim’s responsibility is made that leads to emotional responses consisting either of sympathy (if the misfortune is judged to have been uncontrollable by the victim), or irritation and anger (if the misfortune is judged as controllable). Which emotional response occurs determines whether supportive responses are enacted. This model of help-giving has received substantial research support, based on a meta-analytic review involving 64 investigations. The present study used a confederate whose ostensible cancer was clearly not of her doing. We thus expected sympathy to be a predominant emotional response from subjects, and that sympathy would predict more supportive responses during the actual interaction.

In addition to sympathy, we also examined others’ (i.e., subjects’) perceptions of the stressfulness of the victim’s condition as a possible predictor of supportiveness. Frequently mentioned in the literature as a source of discomfort between victims of negative events and



others is that non-victims are not privy to details about the crisis, such as its duration, nature, and severity (Silver & Wortman, 1980). As such, people may hold preconceived notions about how serious the event is, about how one copes with such an event, or how quickly one should recover. For example, believing the event is not as serious as it really is could result in inappropriate responses such as encouraging recovery, or making light of the negative event (Lehman et al., 1986). We thus expected that participants who viewed the victim's condition as being a particularly difficult or stressful one would be predisposed to respond in an emotionally supportive manner.

## Method

### Participants

Two-hundred and forty-seven female undergraduate students from a Southern California university subject pool received course credit for participating in this study (see also Westmaas & Silver, 2001). We recruited only women to control for sex and because women are more often providers of emotional support to other women and to men (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). Moreover, we wanted to maximize the external validity of our procedures, and in the real world, self-disclosure is more likely to occur between female interaction partners than between opposite-sex or male partners (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Dindia & Allen, 1992). During debriefing, three participants indicated that they did not believe our cover story and were dropped from analyses. Three additional participants were dropped because of incomplete data, resulting in a sample of 241 participants. Technical difficulties with the video recording equipment precluded coding of verbal and nonverbal behavior for 14 participants. These subjects were dropped from analyses reported below.<sup>2</sup>

Ninety-five percent of participants were between 17 and 24 years of age ( $M = 20.29$ ,  $SD$

= 4.03). Participants were 52% Asian-American, 35% non-Latino White, 7% Latino, and 3% African-American. The remainder (3%) did not indicate their ethnicity or were of mixed ethnicity. As reported below in more detail, ethnicity did not influence the results of this investigation.

### Procedure

The study was conducted over the course of an academic year. Using a procedure adapted from Silver et al. (1990), participants were told that the study was investigating the role of first impressions in the acquaintanceship process. Each participant was told that she and a fellow student (confederate) would be interviewed separately and privately, that the interviews would be taped, and that subsequently, each would listen to the other's interview and then meet for several minutes. Participants were informed that the encounter would be videotaped and later reviewed by the experimenters. To minimize the potential for gender effects, the confederate was also female.

The interview administered to the participant, whose real purpose was to increase the believability of the confederate's taped interview, followed the same format as the confederate interview that participants heard subsequently. In the first part, the experimenter asked specific questions about the participant's home city, family, and academic major. The second section asked a series of questions about her relationships with people. In the final section, the participant was asked whether she had experienced any important negative life events and if so, to describe the experience.

After being interviewed, the participant completed measures of attachment and then listened to the pre-taped confederate's interview.<sup>3</sup> During the confederate interview, the confederate responded to the question about negative life events by revealing that she had

recently been diagnosed with Hodgkins Disease, which she pointed out was a type of cancer. She vividly described the sequence of events and symptoms leading up to her diagnosis (prolonged coughing, night sweats, etc.), as well as the potential effects of her future chemotherapy treatments (vomiting, loss of hair, etc.).<sup>4</sup>

After listening to the confederate's tape, the participant completed measures that included, among others, assessments of her perceived similarity to the victim, her attraction to the victim, and her reactions indicative of anxiety and supportiveness/warmth. Thereafter, the participant and confederate were introduced in a second room and left alone together for approximately 10 minutes. This interaction was videotaped by a third experimenter who was blind to the hypotheses and to participants' questionnaire responses. The confederate was also blind to the negative event mentioned by participants. After the interaction, the participant completed the same measures as prior to the interaction.

One confederate was used throughout the study. She was blind to all hypotheses and to participants' ratings, and she did not listen to participants' interviews. She was an attractive Caucasian female, with blond hair and blue eyes, of average height, and in her early twenties. She described herself as a third year undergraduate from the local community. Before the meeting, the first experimenter briefed the confederate on participants' interview responses to questions about their hometown, academic major, etc. The confederate was instructed to behave as normally as possible during her meeting with the participant.

### Independent Variables

#### Perceived Similarity

Perceived similarity was assessed after participants listened to the confederate interview, but prior to meeting her, using scales ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("a great deal"). Items

were “How much do you feel you share the same views about people as this person?” and “In your opinion, how similar do you feel your personality is to the person you heard on the tape?” These items were chosen because they represent two aspects of similarity associated with attraction to others: similarity in personality (Klohnen & Luo, 2003), and in general attitudes or beliefs (Byrne & Clore, 1970). The items, which were reliable ( $\alpha = .82$ ), were averaged to create a single index of perceived similarity whose distribution was normal.

### Attraction

Attraction to the confederate was measured before the interaction using a 6-item scale taken from Silver et al. (1990). Examples of questions were “Most people would react favorably to this person after a brief acquaintance,” and “This person is the type that almost anyone would like for a neighbor.” Items were rated on scales from 1 (“not at all true”) to 5 (“very true”). Pre-interaction attraction items formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ) so items were averaged to form a single measure of participant-reported attraction to the confederate prior to meeting her.

### Anxiety

Participants’ ratings on the anxiety subscale of The Affects Balance Scale (ABS, Derogatis, 1975) indicated how anxious they were about meeting the confederate after listening to her interview. Five items were rated on scales from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“a great deal”). They formed a reliable subscale ( $\alpha = .76$ ) and were averaged to create a single index of pre-interaction anxiety.

### Sympathy

Before meeting the confederate, participants completed a thought-listing (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981), which asked them to list their current thoughts. Two research assistants, who were blind to the study's hypotheses, analyzed pre-interaction thought-listings for the first 50

participants and created 18 categories of thoughts to account for all statements. These categories provided the template for coding the remaining participants. Percent agreement between raters was good (83%) and discrepancies were resolved by discussion between coders and the first author. Thoughts expressing sympathy, sorrow, or empathy for the victim, or that indicated an appreciation of what the victim must be going through, were counted to provide an index of sympathy (e.g., “she’s going through some tough times,” “her story brought tears to my eyes”).

#### Subjects’ Perceptions of Victim’s Stress

Prior to meeting her, participants completed an item that asked how much stress they believed the confederate had experienced in her lifetime. Responses were provided on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (“much less than average”) to 5 (“much more than average”).

#### Dependent Variables

##### Self-reported Supportiveness/Warmth

Four items from the Campbell and Fehr (1990) checklist of feelings and behavior, completed after the interaction, were used to index participants’ self-report of supportiveness/warmth toward the confederate (e.g., warm, friendly) using scales ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“very much”). Items formed a reliable subscale ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and were averaged to create an index of self-reported supportiveness/warmth.

##### Observers’ Ratings of Vocal/Verbal Supportiveness/Warmth

Raters of the audio portion of the videotapes completed one item that specifically tapped participants’ supportiveness/warmth using a scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“very much”). Judgments were based on verbal expressions of friendliness, a desire to learn about the confederate’s condition, and concern for her well-being. Raters’ agreement for this item was

adequate ( $\alpha = .69$ ), so raters' scores were combined to create a single index of vocal/verbal supportiveness/warmth.

#### Observers' Ratings of Nonverbal Supportiveness/Warmth

Participants' levels of smiling and expressiveness were used as indicators of nonverbal supportiveness/warmth. Nonverbal cues such as smiling and expressiveness are frequently considered to be valid signals of interpersonal closeness and intimacy, and the communication of social support (Jones & Guerrero, 2001). A second set of raters of the videotapes, with the sound turned off, coded each 1-minute segment of the videotape of the interaction for amount of smiling and expressiveness on a scale from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much"). For each rater, we summed scores from the 1-minute segments and took the average (by dividing by number of segments) to achieve a final score on smiling and expressiveness. Inter-rater agreement was .77 for Smiling, and .86 for Expressiveness, so raters' final scores were averaged to create composite measures of smiling and expressiveness.

#### Results

Structural equation modeling was used to examine the relationships predicted by the similarity/attraction and victimization paradigms.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 presents correlations among all variables used in SEM models and their means and standard deviations. AMOS (Arbuckle, 1999; Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999), which uses the maximum likelihood method for analyzing covariance matrices, was used to evaluate model fit. Standardized path coefficients are interpreted as standardized regression coefficients that control for all other relationships depicted in the model. To evaluate the fit of the models to the data, we examined  $\chi^2$ , the comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne

& Cudeck, 1993; Steiger, 1990). RMSEA values of .06 indicate a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999), with decreasing values indicating better fit.

The first model simultaneously evaluated predictions from the similarity/attraction and victimization perspectives. This was accomplished by modeling paths from similarity to both attraction and anxiety, and from each of these variables to every outcome variable. Associations between the predictor variables of sympathy and perceptions of the victim's stress with each outcome variable were also included in this model (see Figure 1). This model, however, did not prove to be a good fit, [ $\chi^2(13) = 62.48, p < .0001; CFI = .71, RMSEA = .13$ ]. To improve the fit of the model, all nonsignificant paths were then removed. Because there were no significant paths associated with pre-interaction anxiety or with expressiveness, these variables were dropped from the model (and the paths associated with them). The resulting model (Figure 2) was an excellent fit to the data [ $\chi^2(11) = 12.06, p < .36; CFI = 1.0, RMSEA = .02$ ]. The change in  $\chi^2$  indicated that the second model was a significantly better fit compared to the first [ $\Delta \chi^2(2) = 50.42, p < .0001$ ]. Examination of path coefficients indicated that similarity was significantly associated with attraction to the victim prior to meeting her ( $\beta = .46, p < .0001$ ). Attraction, in turn, was associated with greater self-reported supportiveness/warmth ( $\beta = .27, p < .0001$ ) and with greater smiling ( $\beta = .13, p < .03$ ). As expected, sympathy was positively associated with vocal/verbal supportiveness/warmth ( $\beta = .19, p < .002$ ), but was negatively associated with smiling ( $\beta = -.16, p < .03$ ). Participants' perceptions of the victim's stress was also associated with vocal/verbal supportiveness/warmth ( $\beta = .12, p < .04$ ).

Because Caucasian- and Asian-American subjects' (the two largest ethnic groups in the sample) differed in perceptions of the victim's stress [ $t(197) = 2.50, p < .01$ ], and vocal/verbal supportiveness/warmth [ $t(197) = 2.32, p < .02$ ], another model was run identical to the previous

but modeled the relationships between ethnicity and these variables. This model also proved to be an excellent fit ( $CFI = 1.0$ ,  $RMSEA = 0$ ) and indicated that ethnicity had no significant bearing on the size or significance of relationships reported above.

To address the possibility that participants' displays of supportiveness were masking feelings of discomfort, two raters of the videotaped interaction independently assessed behavioral nervousness (e.g., playing with hair, nail-biting), and avoidance of eye contact with the confederate, on 5 point scales (*not at all* to *very much*) for each 1- minute segment of the interaction. Scores were averaged to form composite indices of nervousness and avoidance of eye contact ( $\alpha$ s between raters were greater than .70). These behavioral measures of discomfort served as control variables in regressions that modeled each of the significant paths depicted in Figure 2. These associations remained the same in magnitude (differences  $< .02$ ) and in significance, indicating that participants' supportiveness was not masking underlying discomfort.

### Discussion

This study simulated a real-world situation – the meeting of a young woman ostensibly diagnosed with cancer (confederate) and a member of her peer group – to investigate the ways in which perceived similarity by peers might impact on their supportiveness. The interaction was judged by multiple individuals. Moreover, assessments of cognition, emotion, and of verbal and nonverbal behavior, were provided by participants and by observers of the interaction. Using this methodology, we were able to test two competing models of the role of perceived similarity on supportiveness to victims.

According to one model, referred to as the victimization perspective, greater perceived similarity should lead to decreased supportiveness through anxiety aroused in the interaction. In contrast, the similarity/attraction paradigm suggests that greater perceived similarity should lead



to increased supportiveness through attraction. Our results were consistent with the similarity/attraction paradigm as opposed to the victimization perspective. Results from an initial structural equation model indicated that similarity was unrelated to anxiety before meeting the confederate, and that anxiety was unrelated to supportiveness/warmth outcomes. When these pathways, along with other nonsignificant relationships, were eliminated from the model, the resulting good-fitting model indicated that greater similarity was associated with greater attraction. Stronger attraction, in turn, was associated with higher supportiveness/warmth ratings from two separate sources (self-report and nonverbal raters). Moreover, these effects could not be explained by participants feigning supportiveness to mask underlying feelings of discomfort (because controlling for signs of physical discomfort did not alter the above relationships). These results extend findings from the helping literature by demonstrating that through attraction, similarity is associated not just with tangible helping behaviors but also with emotionally supportive behaviors.

As expected, participants' feelings of sympathy experienced prior to meeting the confederate were significantly associated with verbal/vocal ratings of their supportiveness/warmth. Sympathy, however, was negatively associated with smiling. This latter finding might be due to the possibility that participants who felt a great deal of sympathy for the victim might have been more focused on making comforting statements rather than attempting to make the interaction go pleasantly. Participants' greater perceptions of the victim's level of stress were also related to greater vocal/verbal supportiveness/warmth, suggesting that acknowledging the seriousness of a victim's plight should foster supportive responses. This relationship, however, was quite modest.

Results for similarity and attraction are consistent with the empirical and anecdotal reports of the benefits of support groups for victims (e.g., Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickerson, 2000). Our results suggest the possibility that in these support groups, initial feelings of similarity toward other group members arising from the shared victimization may increase feelings of attraction. Such positive feelings may then lead to the enactment of supportive interactions or behaviors that may facilitate adjustment.

The present study focused on the role of similarity because similarity can be highlighted by victims to enhance the likelihood of supportive or warm responses from others. Given the pervasiveness of the similarity/attraction effect for a variety of indices (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, physical attraction), victims may be able to easily identify and highlight similarities to others during social interactions. Doing so may lead to new friendships and activities that better facilitate adjustment to the victimization. The results of this study suggest that victims need not be concerned that doing so might enhance others' feelings of vulnerability and create discomfort and anxiety.

Subsequent research may wish to build on our methodology to investigate other variables, in addition to perceived similarity and attraction, which might be associated with supportiveness to victims. Previous studies of supportiveness have tended to rely on hypothetical scenarios and are therefore more likely to be susceptible to social desirability biases. Future studies should try to use "live" interactions to examine factors that might lead to supportive responses to victims. Future research may also wish to explore mixed gender dyads or exclusively male dyads in interactions because existing research suggests that men and women differ in their manner of providing support. This research has demonstrated that women smile more than men, are more nonverbally expressive, more tactile, and interact more intimately

with others (see Hall, 1984, and Hall & Haberstadt, 1986, for reviews). Additional research has shown that women provide more “person-centered” comforting messages by listening more, being evaluatively neutral, are more accepting of another’s distress and more empathic (Barbee, Gulley, & Cunningham, 1990; Derlega, Barbee, & Winstead, 1994; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). Men, in contrast, produce more instrumentally- or problem-focused support messages, such as recommending escape or diversion strategies. Whether such gender differences remain when the interaction involves a serious victimization, however, has not yet been examined. The above noted gender differences in styles of support provision hints at the possibility that relationships among perceived similarity, attraction, and supportiveness may be different for men compared to women.

Future research may also wish to manipulate similarity experimentally. Such a methodology might enable an exploration of possible limits on the effects of perceived similarity on supportiveness. For example, it may be difficult to identify with, and therefore perceive oneself as similar to, a victim whose illness has resulted in disfigurement or one that engenders stigmatization. In such instances, other variables such as dispositional empathy (Trobst et al., 1994) or previous experience with negative life events (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokan, 1990) might influence supportiveness more strongly. Understanding more extensively the relationship between perceived similarity and supportiveness will, we hope, lead to the development of interventions that will help victims receive the support they desire and need.

Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term "victim" has historically been used in this literature to refer to someone who has encountered a negative life event. While we have chosen to stay with this convention, we do not mean to imply that the person is of inferior or unfortunate status.
- <sup>2</sup> Results were essentially the same if mean substitution was used for these participants.
- <sup>3</sup> During the course of this study, confederate attachment style was manipulated and subjects' attachment style was also assessed (see Westmaas & Silver, 2001, for further details). However, the confederate's interview was essentially identical for all participants in terms of the stressful event described and the background information she provided about herself. Moreover, neither participant attachment style, confederate attachment, nor their interaction, had any impact on the results obtained in the present study, based on regressions that were conducted. Therefore these variables will not be discussed further.
- <sup>4</sup> Among the first 110 participants, only 50% mentioned a negative event, and of those, only 2 mentioned a personal illness. Moreover, these two participants' similarity scores were 1.5 and 3.0 respectively (on a scale of 1 to 5), suggesting that experiencing a serious illness did not necessarily translate to higher similarity scores. This is perhaps not surprising considering that Hodgkin's disease is a rare illness with very serious symptoms and side-effects of treatment (which the victim described in her interview).
- <sup>5</sup> Although we could not directly test Rosenbaum's (1986) dissimilarity-repulsion hypothesis through the use of a comparison group that provided no information about similarity, we indirectly addressed this hypothesis by examining the association between similarity and attraction for participants above and below the median on similarity. If the association between ratings of similarity and attraction were stronger for participants *below* the median on

similarity (i.e., subjects who felt relatively dissimilar to the victim) compared to the association between ratings of similarity and attraction for those *above* the median, the dissimilarity-repulsion hypothesis would be supported. The opposite pattern was observed, however. For participants above the median on perceived similarity, the relationship between similarity and attraction was statistically significant ( $r = .33, p < .0001$ ), whereas for those below the median, the association was not significant ( $r = .17, p < .10$ ). A dissimilarity-repulsion explanation for our results is therefore unlikely.

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Table 1.

*Correlations among Variables in Structural Equation Models (N = 229).*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Predictors									
1. Similarity	-								
2. Attraction	.47**	-							
3. Anxiety (pre-interaction)	-.05	-.06	-						
4. Sympathy	.13*	.14*	.02	-					
5. Perception of Victim's Stress	.04	.15*	-.05	.05	-				
Dependent Variables									
6. Self-rated Supportiveness/warmth	.22**	.28**	-.02	.05	.11	-			
7. Smiling	-.04	.12	.11	-.14*	-.03	.08	-		
8. Vocal/verbal Supportiveness/warmth	.13	.09	-.08	.20*	.13*	.27**	.18**	-	
9. Expressiveness	.01	.10	.10	.03	-.00	.23**	.42**	.14*	-
M	2.94	3.59	1.97	.98	4.24	3.74	3.12	3.07	2.49
SD	.84	.68	.69	1.09	.72	.71	.57	1.05	.57

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed).

Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Structural equation model depicting hypothesized relationships based on the similarity/attraction paradigm and the “victimization” perspective.

*Figure 2.* Final structural equation model depicting effects of similarity on attraction and indices of supportiveness/warmth [for simplicity of presentation, correlations between disturbances (circles) are not depicted].



