

**From Whom Do People Seek What Type of Support? A Regulatory Scope Perspective**

David S. Lee<sup>1</sup> and Kentaro Fujita<sup>2</sup>

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Author affiliations: <sup>1</sup>University at Buffalo, State University of New York; <sup>2</sup>The Ohio State University

**Corresponding Author: David S. Lee**  
327 Baldy Hall, Buffalo, NY, 14228.  
Email: dslee9@buffalo.edu

### Abstract

From *whom* do people seek *what* type of support? Although people regularly seek support from close and distant others, little work has systematically investigated when and why people approach different people in their support network for different types of support. The present research introduces a novel distinction of social support and explores its relationship to the scope or range of support providers people would consider asking for support. Based on a recent extension of construal level theory (Trope et al., 2020), five experiments tested the bidirectional relation between *levels* of support and scope – the latter assessed by the social distance of potential support providers. Experiment 1 demonstrated that people can categorize supportive behaviors into low-level support (i.e., addressing the effect of a problem) and high-level support (i.e., addressing the cause of a problem). Experiments 2 and 4 showed that being prompted to seek low-level (vs. high-level) support oriented people toward support providers who are socially proximal (vs. distal). In Experiment 3, thinking about interacting with a socially proximal (vs. distal) support provider led to a greater focus on receiving low-level (vs. high-level) support. Testing the implication of the link between levels of support and scope, Experiment 5 demonstrated that support recipients reported they would feel more gratitude when they imagined receiving low-level (vs. high-level) support from socially proximal (vs. distal) support providers. Broader implications for social support, interpersonal relationships, and construal level theory research are discussed.

Keywords: social support, scope, construal level theory, gratitude, social network, social distance

### **From Whom Do People Seek What Type of Support? A Regulatory Scope Perspective**

Whom do people turn to for support in times of need? The conventional wisdom is that people turn to their closest others for social support—a view also echoed in empirical research. For example, attachment theory proposes that people turn to their attachment figures (e.g., parents, romantic partners) who can act as safe havens during stressful times (Ainsworth, 1991; Bowlby, 1982; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona & Russell, 2017). Social network research, grounded in sociology, posits that people typically seek support from their strong ties (Krackhardt, 1992; Levin & Cross, 2004; McPherson et al., 2006; Wellman, 1979). However, people also regularly receive support from more distant others (e.g., colleagues, acquaintances). Studies examining people’s daily support seeking behaviors show that not only do people seek support from a diverse array of individuals, but a substantial portion of their “core discussion network” includes support providers who are not particularly close or intimate (e.g., co-workers, spiritual leaders, or doctors; Small, 2013; Small et al., 2015; Small & Sukhu, 2016). For example, an observational study tracking graduate students’ support seeking over a year revealed that students often confided in people other than their romantic partner or academic advisors; at times, they were reluctant to confide in their closest others (Small, 2017). These findings are consistent with earlier findings that strong ties (e.g., friends, siblings) make up only about half of all supportive relationships (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Thus, a considerable portion of a person’s support network may include distant others.

That people seek support from both close and distant others raises two key questions: 1) what kind of support do people expect from support providers who are close versus distant, and 2) what makes people consider approaching their close (vs. distant) others for support? To our knowledge, there is little systematic theoretical work that addresses these questions. This is

surprising given decades of evidence showing that having a support network composed of diverse relationships promotes mental and physical health (Berkman et al., 2000; Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009; Seeman, 1996; Thoits, 2011). Because a network of diverse (vs. homogeneous) support providers may be more capable of helping people deal with different needs in life (Cheung et al., 2015; Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009; Granovetter, 1973), understanding and identifying the mechanisms that enable people to mobilize this kind of network is crucial. To this end, the present research draws on construal level theory (Lieberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010) and its more recent regulatory scope extension (Trope et al., 2020), to shed light on the support seeking processes that involve psychologically proximal and distal others, as well as the implications of receiving different types of support from them.

### **From *Whom* Do People Seek *What* Type of Support?**

To date, most social support research has focused on examining the source (e.g., “Who do people turn to for support?”) or type of support (e.g., “Do people seek emotional vs. instrumental support?”) as separate questions, rather than exploring the combination of the two. For instance, two major research traditions—attachment theory and social network research—predict that people would turn to their attachment figures or strong ties for support (e.g., Bowlby, 1982; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Krackhardt, 1992; Wellman, 1979). However, these seminal perspectives do not make explicit predictions about the *types* of support people would seek (Kammrath et al., 2020). Moreover, because these approaches tend to study support transactions in close relationships, they offer little insight into the support interactions with more distant others (e.g., non-attachment figures, weak ties).

On the other hand, the social support and coping literatures have primarily concentrated on how the types of support received or the contexts in which support transactions occur

influence support outcomes. For example, people can seek emotional support (i.e., comfort and reassurance), instrumental support (i.e., tangible assistance), informational support (i.e., advice and information), or other types of support to address their needs (Cohen et al., 2000; Cutrona, 1990; Uchino, 2004). Other work has focused on the role of support providers in facilitating coping; for example, whether the provider gives invisible, indirect support (Bolger et al., 2000; Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Howland & Simpson, 2010), autonomy support (Deci et al., 2006; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Weinstein et al., 2016), or support that facilitates emotion regulation (Lee et al., 2020; Marroquin, 2011; Zaki & Williams, 2013). Major theoretical models in this tradition examine whether social support facilitates coping when a stressor is absent versus present (i.e., main effect vs. stress-buffering hypothesis; see Cohen & Wills, 1985; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Lakey & Orehek, 2011) or whether the support provided matches recipients' needs (Cavallo et al., 2016; Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cutrona, 1990; Cutrona et al., 2007; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Lee et al., 2021; Rini et al., 2006; Zee et al., 2020). As such, the primary focus of the above research is not on from whom people seek support, but rather the contexts in which the support transaction occurs and its outcomes. Finally, although the coping literature distinguishes problem-focused vs. emotion-focused coping (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), these coping strategies are often discussed in the context of *intrapersonal* rather than interpersonal resources (see Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 758).

Complementing these perspectives is a growing body of work that suggests whom people approach for support may be closely tied to their needs in the moment. For instance, people turn to different individuals for different emotional needs (e.g., turn to best friends to cheer up, turn to their mother to calm down; Cheung et al., 2015). When choosing whom to approach for support, people also consider whether the potential support provider has the skills and expertise

to fulfill their needs (Small & Sukhu, 2016; Perry & Pescosolido, 2010). Moreover, Fitzsimons and Shah (2008) found that instrumental (vs. non-instrumental) others – those who can facilitate the attainment of a personal goal – are brought to mind more easily and approached more quickly, suggesting a tie between personal goals and support providers. These findings are consistent with an emerging perspective that people’s support network is dynamic (vs. static) and may change as a function of their needs (Lee et al., 2020; Shea & Fitzsimons, 2016; Small et al., 2015). Thus, the goals and needs of the support seeker may influence whom they go to for support.

### **Scope as an Extension of Construal Level Theory**

That people turn to both close and distant others for support indicates that social distance – the removal of another person from the self – may play a key role in social support processes. Construal level theory proposes that social distance is an instance of psychological distance – the removal of an event from direct experience (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). Events that are psychologically distal versus proximal present distinct epistemic and regulatory challenges. To address distal events, people must deal with variability – the more distal events are, the more ways those events can differ from current experience. Any response to distal events must be robust to the spectrum of possible ways that those events may manifest. By contrast, to orient to near events, people must tailor their thoughts, feelings, and behavior to idiosyncratic and contextual specifics. This allows them to become more sensitive and responsive to local contingencies.

In a recent extension of construal level theory, Trope and colleagues (2020) suggested that people address these challenges of psychological distance vs. proximity by expanding and contracting *scope*—the range of possibilities that people account for in thoughts, feelings, and

behavior. As scope expands, people orient to an increasingly broader range of concerns across time, places, people, and counterfactual alternatives. As scope contracts, people focus on an increasingly narrower set of concerns more relevant to the here-and-now. Note that scope refers to the diversity and variance – rather than the number – of elements considered. Macintosh, Fuji, and Honeycrisp apples are all fruit, as are Macintosh, Tomatoes, and Eggplants. Although the number of elements in these two sets is held constant, the diversity of the latter is greater than the former – and thus more expansive in scope. Moreover, whereas psychological distance refers to the relationship between a person and an event (or an object), scope refers to a psychological feature of the individual – the span of possibilities that one considers. Thus, while psychological distance and scope may be distinct constructs, scope nevertheless modulates with distance: one expands (vs. contracts) scope to address concerns that are psychologically distal (vs. proximal).

There are distinct trade-offs in expanding vs. contracting scope. Although expanding one's scope allows one to consider remote events and entities, it detracts from the ability to respond to and exploit local opportunities. While contracting one's scope enhances allows one to navigate and capitalize on local contexts, this fine-tuning leaves people unable to respond flexibly to changing and/or novel circumstances. Thus, people must balance these trade-offs by finding ways to modulate scope adaptively.

Trope and colleagues (2020) propose that people have evolved and developed several mental and social tools that support the expansion vs. contraction of scope. Traditionally, construal level theory highlights construal level as a mental tool with which to address the challenges of psychological distance. High-level construal is a representational process that focuses on the essential and invariant features that are unlikely to change across different manifestations of an event. This focus on invariants represents a sensible response to the

challenge of variability posed by distal events. By contrast, low-level construal is a representational process that focuses on the idiosyncratic specifics that distinguish one event from others like it. This focus on contextual detail allows people to tailor their responses to unique proximal events. Thus, while thinking of a beach vacation abstractly as “enjoying time in the sun” expands scope and allows one to make appropriate plans when the event is in the distant future, thinking of the same vacation as concretely as “setting up on this spot vs. that spot on the beach” contracts scope and allows one to exploit opportunities in the here-and-now.

Decades of research corroborate the proposition that high-level vs. low-level construal are mental tools that facilitate expanding vs. contracting scope. When presented with distal vs. proximal events or objects, people tend to engage in high-level vs. low-level construal, respectively. For example, people construe more distal future activities (e.g., studying) in high-level terms (e.g., “doing well in school”) rather than in low-level terms (e.g., “reading a textbook;” Liberman & Trope, 1998). Similarly, when describing the behavior of a socially distal vs. proximal person, people use words that are high-level (e.g., the person is preventing tooth decay) more than low-level (e.g., the person is moving a brush around one’s mouth; Liviatan et al., 2008; also see Smith & Trope, 2006). Importantly, emerging research suggests that engaging in different levels of construal also expands vs. contracts scope. For example, comparing themselves to others on high-level (vs. low-level) dimensions led people to increase their interest in comparing to distal (vs. proximal) others (Yudkin et al., 2020). When learning about high-level (vs. low-level) information, people considered a more socially distal (vs. proximal) teacher (Kalkstein et al., 2016). These findings corroborate the notion that high-level vs. low-level construal helps people expand vs. contract regulatory scope.

### **Levels of Social Support**

Critically, Trope and colleagues (2020) have proposed that the notion of level can be applied beyond mental construals and characterize other tools that people use to modulate scope. High-level tools treat distinct entities as functionally equivalent and interchangeable – enabling a unified response to variability that supports expanding scope. By contrast, low-level tools distinguish entities that might otherwise be viewed as substitutable – enabling the specification that supports contracting scope. Thus, whereas federal governments as social systems treat each locality as equal and substitutable constituents, local governments are designed to respond to the unique needs of a given region (i.e., offering non-substitutable services). Governments may thus represent social tools for modulating scope: whereas working within a federal government should help expand scope, working within a local government should help contract scope. Similarly, as higher vs. lower levels of management require thinking of members of an organization more vs. less interchangeable, the former may allow one to expand scope and facilitate thinking about the goals of the organization across time and places, the latter may allow one to contract scope and focus on specific tasks that need to be completed in the here-and-now.

In the present paper, we extend these ideas to propose that the notion of level applies to the needs that people have, which then influences the types of support people seek. Here, we introduce a novel distinction between high-level and low-level support. High-level support aims to address the primary, central, and core needs that people have (i.e., high-level needs). Low-level support, by contrast, aims to address secondary, incidental, and context-specific needs (i.e., low-level needs). Whereas high-level support treats various stress experiences as interchangeable and substitutable instances, low-level support addresses the unique circumstances of each individual stress experience. Thus, social support may serve as a social tool for modulating

scope: the need for high-level vs. low-level support prompts expansion vs. contraction of scope, respectively.

### *High-level and Low-level Support Addressing the Cause and Effect of a Problem*

Rather than approaching the stress experience as containing a single problem that needs to be addressed, the present research adopts a perspective that stress experiences have distinct components—the stressor and the stress effect—that evoke distinct needs. For example, imagine a scenario in which Mitch was just fired from his job (i.e., the stressor), which led him to have financial problems (i.e., the stress effect). In this scenario, Mitch has a need to address his unemployment problem but also has a need to address the subsequent problem that originated from the stressor—the financial problems.

Prior work has shown that an event's cause and effect are high-level and low-level features of the event, respectively (Rim et al., 2013). Causes are more high-level than effects because the presence of effects depends on the presence of causes, but the presence of causes does not depend on the presence of effects (Suppes, 1970). This logical requirement makes the cause a more central and defining feature of the event and the effect necessarily a more incidental feature. Thus, Mitch's unemployment issue should be more central and defining of the stress experience because while getting a new job eliminates the employment need and its consequent financial needs, addressing his financial needs itself does not necessarily eliminate his employment need. In this paper, we operationalize high-level support as support efforts that address the cause of the problem (e.g., help Mitch find a job) and low-level support as support efforts that address the effect of the problem (e.g., lend Mitch some money).

### **The Present Research: Social Support Across Social Distance**

Building on the recent extension of construal level theory (Trope et al., 2020), we propose a bidirectional relation between levels of support and scope. Specifically, we posit that the need for support—to address the cause or the effect of the problem—modulates scope. That is, the need for low-level support contracts scope to enable dealing with psychologically proximal aspects of a stress experience that incorporates its specific and idiosyncratic details (i.e., effect of a problem). When people contract scope, they take into account a narrower set of possibilities that allow immersion into the immediate environment. Thus, during support seeking, this would result in a search of potential support providers who are psychologically proximal (e.g., socially or spatially proximal to me). Conversely, the need for high-level support expands scope to enable dealing with psychologically distal aspects of a stress experience that treats all of its instances as interchangeable (i.e., cause of a problem). When people expand scope, they take into account a broader and more diverse set of possibilities to find courses of actions that are robust to contextual variability. Thus, this expansion of scope in turn should result in a search for potential providers that includes those who are psychologically distal (e.g., socially or spatially distal from me).

The present research aims to illuminate social support processes by examining how levels of support are associated with scope (i.e., consideration of a broader vs. narrower set of potential support providers in one's support network). Five experiments examine the relation between levels of support and scope—specifically as reflected in the question, “to whom do people turn to for what type of support?” We first examine whether people can distinguish levels of support based on the relationship between cause and effect (Experiment 1). Having empirically established the notion of support levels, the next two studies examine the bidirectional association between levels of support and scope. Specifically, Experiment 2 tests the prediction

that being prompted to seek low-level (vs. high-level) support would contract (vs. expand) one's scope. Here, we hypothesized that the need to receive low-level (vs. high-level) support would lead people to consider a support-provider who is socially proximal (vs. distal). Experiment 3 examines the prediction that contracting (vs. expanding) one's scope would lead to a greater focus on receiving low-level relative to high-level support. Here, we predicted that thinking about interacting with a socially proximal (vs. distal) support provider would lead to a greater focus on seeking low-level relative to high-level support. Experiment 4 seeks to generalize the bidirectional association between levels of support and scope in a more ecologically valid context. Finally, Experiment 5 tests the implication of receiving low-level and high-level support from socially proximal and distal others.

Consistent with prior construal level research (e.g., Lee et al., 2017), our predictions about the relation between levels of support and scope are necessarily *relative* (vs. absolute). That is, our predictions are *not* about whether support seekers would prefer to receive high-level support from distal others exclusively or low-level support from proximal others exclusively. Instead, we propose that a focus on low-level relative to high-level support will be associated with greater contraction (expansion) of scope. Similarly, contracting (expanding) scope will be associated with greater *relative* focus on low-level to high-level support. Further, research on attachment theory and work on strong ties indicate that people prefer to receive support from proximal (vs. distal) others. Thus, aside from a potential main effect of social distance on support seeking, we refrain from making absolute predictions throughout our studies.

Importantly, we note that social distance is likely to be one of the many mechanisms that guides the support seeking process; this complex process may be influenced by several factors such as providers' availability or expertise in addressing the needs, interdependence in the

relationship, prior support experience with the provider, level of trust, recipients' traits, etc. In fact, these processes may be often conflated with social distance (e.g., people trust proximal vs. distal others more; people are around their proximal vs. distal others more often). Controlling for these factors in real-world social support contexts can be challenging. Consider, for example, the study design of Bolger and colleagues (2000) who examined the support processes of law school students who were preparing for the New York State Bar Examination. To properly test our hypotheses in this context, several criteria would need to be met. First, because the cause and effect of each stress experience is defined by the person, participants would have to identify the stressor (e.g., anxiety about the bar exam) and its effect (e.g., lack of concentration). Then, participants would need to identify multiple individuals who hold similar levels of expertise, availability, motivation, and other relevant qualities while differing only in social distance. Given the challenges and potential confounds, we chose to rely on experimental methodology using hypothetical scenarios; this method enabled us to control for variables outside the scope of this paper and enhance the rigor of our hypothesis testing. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the important role that these processes play in support seeking in the real world and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of our approach in the General Discussion section.

### **Sample Size and Exclusionary Criteria**

Sample sizes for all experiments were determined prior to the data collection. Based on the effect sizes observed in comparable study designs from prior research (e.g., Lee et al., 2017; Rim et al., 2013), we determined a priori the minimum sample size that provides 80% power to detect a significant effect. When comparable prior studies did not exist, we obtained the effect size based on a pilot study and preregistered the sample size based on that effect size prior to data collection. In all experiments, we intentionally oversampled to account for participants who

may fail our attention check. Finally, we conducted a sensitivity power analysis for each experiment using G\*Power to examine the smallest effect size our final N provided given 80% and 90% power for the primary statistical tests of our hypotheses; this was done to further contextualize our effect size with what one could reasonably expect to estimate given the sample size. Data collection for each experiment was completed in one session, and no additional data were added at any point. Moreover, no data were analyzed until all data were collected for a given experiment.

We applied the same exclusion criteria across all experiments for consistency (exceptions described below). First, in all experiments, we excluded participants who indicated they were not paying attention (i.e., reported being “very distracted” on our attention check measure). Second, Experiments 2 and 4 asked participants to nominate support providers by providing their initials. We excluded participants who failed to provide any initials. Third, Experiment 5 involved a name generator task in which participants provided initials of ten support providers and answered questions about them. We excluded participants who listed multiple support providers with the same initials because it would have been impossible for these participants to tell to which support provider the study questions were referring. Further, we excluded participants who failed to nominate ten support providers because our experimental manipulation involved comparisons between multiple nominees (Experiment 5). Notably, including the exclusions in analyses whenever possible did not substantively alter the results in all experiments. All study materials, data, and the preregistered data analysis plan for Experiments 2 and 3 are available at Open Science Framework ([https://osf.io/u9nwq/?view\\_only=082e3ce64ccd477b86ea023fc8776d7a](https://osf.io/u9nwq/?view_only=082e3ce64ccd477b86ea023fc8776d7a)). We also include the full report of the dropped experiments in an online supplement (LINK). These experiments were

not included in the main text because they used scenarios that confounded levels of support with emotional vs. instrumental support.

### **Experiment 1: Establishing Levels of Social Support**

The goal of this study was to empirically validate the notion of levels of social support. Because the presence of a stress effect depends on the presence of a stressor, addressing the stressor (i.e., high-level support) should be more central to the social support process than addressing the stress effect (i.e., low-level support). If people recognize this cause-effect relationship, they should be more likely to prioritize receiving high-level support to low-level support, regardless of the elements that make up the cause-effect relationship. To test the assumption that people view addressing high-level (vs. low-level) support to be more central when seeking support, we adopted a methodological approach from prior work (Fujita et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2017; Liviatan et al., 2008; Rim et al., 2013). Specifically, Fujita and colleagues (2008) demonstrated that when choosing a class, students placed more weight on its primary features (e.g., course material) than its secondary features (e.g., lecture hall facilities). Similarly, we reasoned that removing the stressor (e.g., by getting a job) should loom larger in people's minds than removing the stress effect (e.g., by getting some financial relief). Thus, we hypothesized that participants would endorse high-level support more than low-level support.

### **Method**

**Research Ethics Statement.** The Institutional Review Boards at the Ohio State University (Protocol 2016B0464, “Antecedents and Consequences of Interpersonal Interactions”) and the University at Buffalo, State University of New York (STUDY00005863, “Social Support and Scope”) approved all research reported in this manuscript.

**Participants.** Participants ( $N = 421$ , 198 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 41.71$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.29$ ) were recruited from Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in exchange for \$.50. A power analysis based on the effect size ( $f = .13$ ) from a pilot study indicated that a sample size of 404 would provide 80% power to detect a significant effect; we intentionally oversampled ( $N = 420$ ) in anticipation of some participants not meeting our inclusion criterion.

**Measures and Procedure.** Participants were presented with three hypothetical scenarios in which they were seeking social support to address their problem. To determine the content of the hypothetical scenarios, we conducted a pilot test (on a different sample) in which participants wrote about common stressors they encounter in their daily lives. Most participants listed difficulty in achieving health-related goals (e.g., struggle with losing weight) and regulating stress from job or other life domains. Based on this information, we created three scenarios. In each scenario, participants read that a stressor (cause) has caused a stress effect (effect). For example, one scenario read:

*Imagine that you have been suffering from low motivation to do anything. This low motivation is causing you to feel depressed.*

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the low-level support condition, they indicated the extent to which they should seek low-level support to address the stress effect (i.e., *“In this scenario, how much do you think you should seek someone who can help you feel less depressed?”*) using a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) scale. In the high-level support condition, they indicated the extent to which they should seek high-level support to address the stressor (i.e., *“In this scenario, how much do you think you should seek someone who can help you become more motivated?”*) using the same scale. Critically, the content of the stressor and its stress effect in each scenario was counter-balanced in two versions of the survey.

Thus, what was the stressor (i.e., lack of motivation) and the stress effect (i.e., depressed mood) in Survey Version A was reversed in Survey Version B (depressed mood causing lack of motivation). This allowed us to test what distinguishes high-level support from low-level support is the relationship between cause and effect rather than specific elements that make up high-level and low-level support. Overall, the study had a 2 (level of support sought: low-level vs. high-level) X 2 (two counterbalanced survey versions: version A vs. version B) between-subjects design, with the dependent variable being the endorsement of support.

### Results and Discussion

Based on the exclusion criteria described earlier, Experiment 1 had a total of 420 participants ( $N_{\text{low-level}} = 211$ ;  $N_{\text{version A}} = 209$ ). Sensitivity power analyses revealed that this  $N$  provides 80% power to detect an effect of  $d = .27$  and 90% power to detect an effect of  $d = .32$ . We conducted a 2 (support sought: low-level vs. high-level) X 2 (survey version: A vs. B) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the endorsement rating for the support sought across all three scenarios collapsed across the two counter-balanced survey versions (see Table 1 for descriptive and inferential statistics for each scenario). As predicted, participants indicated that they should seek high-level support more than low-level support across all scenarios,  $F(1, 416) = 30.10$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $d = .54$ , 95% CI = [.46, .98]. Survey version (i.e., reversing the causes and effects) did not influence the support endorsement rating,  $p > .61$ . Moreover, the support X survey version interaction was non-significant ( $p = .93$ ), suggesting that the finding is likely to be driven by the cause-effect nature (i.e., level) of the problem and not by the specific elements of the support (e.g., help people feel less depressed vs. boost motivation).

Table 1. *Endorsement of high-level and low-level support per scenario in Experiment 1*

Scenario	Low-level $M$ ( $SD$ )	High-level $M$ ( $SD$ )	$p$	$d$	95% CI
1a	4.79 (1.78)	5.64 (1.53)	<.001	.51	[.41, 1.32]
2a	4.77 (1.76)	5.62 (1.38)	<.001	.54	[.40, 1.27]

3a	5.11 (1.80)	5.53 (1.37)	.057	.26	[-.01, .86]
1b	5.01 (1.73)	5.57 (1.43)	.011	.35	[.13, .99]
2b	4.86 (1.66)	5.67 (1.46)	<.001	.52	[.39, 1.24]
3b	4.97 (1.66)	5.78 (1.32)	<.001	.54	[.40, 1.22]

*Note.* *N*s = 105 (Survey version A & Low-level), 104 (Survey version A & High-level), 106 (Survey version B & Low-level), and 105 (Survey version B & High-level).

These results suggest that receiving high-level (vs. low-level) support may be more central in support seeking process. Importantly, the finding that participants prioritized high-level support to low-level support even when the elements that make up each level of support were counterbalanced (i.e., version A vs. version B) indicates that our effect is likely to be driven by the cause-effect relationship of the problem rather than the support or problem content. These results extend prior work on construal level (Rim et al., 2013) and corroborate the recent extension by Trope and colleagues (2020) by providing initial evidence that social support can be categorized based on the notion of levels. Having established the notion of levels of support, we next sought to examine its implications for the question: From *whom* would people seek low-level vs. high-level support?

### **Experiment 2: From Whom Would People Seek Low-level vs. High-level Support?**

According to our theoretical framework, the needs for low-level and high-level support contract and expand scope. Building on the results from Experiment 1, we reasoned that the need for low-level support (i.e., addressing the effect) would prompt people to contract their scope—leading them to consider a narrower set of support providers composed of socially proximal others; in contrast, the need for high-level support (i.e., addressing the cause) would expand their scope—leading them to consider a broader and more diverse set of support providers that include distal others. To test this idea, we asked participants to imagine that they were in need of support and instructed them to nominate someone from whom they would seek high-level support or

someone from whom they would seek low-level support. Subsequently, participants rated their social distance to their nominee. We expected that being prompted to seek low-level (vs. high-level) support would contract (vs. expand) participants' scope to consider more socially proximal (vs. distal) support providers. Given this difference in their consideration set, we hypothesized that participants would be more likely to consider seeking from a proximal (vs. distal) support provider for low-level (vs. high-level) support.

## Method

**Participants.** MTurk workers in the United States responded to an online survey in exchange for \$.50 ( $N = 255$ , 144 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 40.62$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.66$ ). Sample size was determined by following the effect size from a pilot study ( $d = .38$ ). An a priori power analysis using G\*Power indicated that to achieve 80% power with this effect size, a total of 246 participants was needed. In anticipation of some participants not meeting the inclusion criteria, we oversampled to recruit 256 participants.<sup>1</sup> Sample size, procedure, and data analysis plan for this study were all preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/~Fx97dkwfAa>).

**Measures and Procedure.** To test our prediction, we adapted a validated scenario from Experiment 1 (i.e., lack of motivation causing depression). We changed “depression” to “stress” to rule out the possibility that asking participants to address depression may skew them to think of qualified professionals (e.g., therapist) rather than someone in their support network. We chose the above scenario because manipulating levels of support within the emotional domain provides the most conservative test of our prediction: it helps distinguish the notion of levels of support from the distinction between emotional vs. instrumental support (Cohen et al., 2000;

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<sup>1</sup> There are minor differences between our preregistered Ns and the final Ns collected in the studies (e.g., 256 vs. 255 in Experiment 2). These minor discrepancies are due to MTurk procedural issues (e.g., multiple participants completing the survey for a limited number of slots available for compensation). Critically, data were not added or excluded after the completion of data collection. Participants were only excluded based on our preregistered criteria.

Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Using a between-participants design, we randomly assigned participants to either nominate one person whom they would ask for low-level support or one person whom they would ask for high-level support. Specifically, participants in the low-level support condition read:

*Now, imagine that you are looking to solve the effect of your problem (i.e., low motivation). You are looking for someone who can give you a solution to the above problem. This person focuses on helping you deal with the effect of your problem, rather than focusing on removing what is causing the problem. Typically, this is achieved by engaging in a conversation that focuses on identifying how the stressor is impacting you and removing this problem so that it no longer bothers you.*

Participants in the high-level support condition read:

*Now, imagine that you are looking to solve the cause of your problem (i.e., stress). You are looking for someone who can give you a solution to the above problem. This person focuses on helping you remove what is causing your problem, rather than focusing on helping you deal with the effect of your problem. Typically, this is achieved by engaging in a conversation that focuses on identifying and removing the cause of your problem so that it does not lead to more problems.*

After participants typed in the initials of their nominee, they indicated their social distance to the nominee by responding to the question, “*How close are you to this person?*” on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all close*, 7 = *very close*).

Critically, we sought to show that scope is differentially associated with levels of support independent of the content that makes up each support level. Thus, half of all participants were randomly assigned to read a scenario in which lack of motivation was causing them to feel

stressed (Survey version A) while the other half read a scenario in which stress was causing lack of motivation (Survey version B). Thus, this study had a 2 (level of support sought: low-level vs. high-level) X 2 (two counterbalanced survey versions: version A vs. version B) between-participants design, with the dependent variable being scope, which was measured through social distance to the support provider nominee.

## Results

**Exclusions.** Based on the exclusion criteria described earlier, the final  $N$  for this study was 253. Sensitivity power analyses using G\*Power revealed that this  $N$  provides 80% power to detect an effect of  $d = .35$  and 90% power to detect an effect of  $d = .41$ .

**Main Analyses.** Based on our preregistered analysis plan, we conducted an independent samples t-test on the social distance ratings to the support provider nominee. Consistent with our hypothesis, participants' nominees for low-level support ( $M = 6.20$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) were rated as closer than nominees for high-level support ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ),  $p = .036$ ,  $d = .27$ , 95% CI = [.02, .73]. To make sure that this finding is driven by levels of support and not by support content, we additionally conducted a 2 (support sought: low-level vs. high-level) X 2 (survey version: A vs. B) between-participants analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the social distance rating. These results confirmed a main effect of support levels ( $p = .035$ ). Importantly, the support level X survey version interaction on the social distance rating was non-significant ( $p = .21$ ), suggesting that our finding is likely driven by the cause-effect structure of the problem and not by the specific support content (e.g., help feel less stressed vs. boost motivation). Thus, these results show that the focus on receiving high-level (vs. low-level) support oriented people toward a distal (vs. proximal) support provider.

## Discussion

The present research proposed that different levels of support are associated with differences in scope. Specifically, we proposed that when people need high-level (vs. low-level) support, they expand (vs. contract) their scope, leading them to consider a broader, more heterogeneous (vs. narrower, more homogeneous) set of support providers. Supporting this prediction, Experiment 2 demonstrated that when seeking high-level (vs. low-level) support, people were more likely to consider a distal (vs. proximal) support provider, regardless of the contents of the support. These findings provide initial evidence for the proposed bidirectional relation between levels of support and scope.

Experiment 3 sought to further test the bidirectional relation between levels of support and scope. The recent extension of construal level theory (Trope et al., 2020) proposed that the functional relation between levels and scope helps people associate high-level (vs. low-level) needs with expansive (vs. contractive) scope. Not only should the need for high-level (vs. low-level) support expand (vs. contract) scope, but the expansive (vs. contractive) scope should also conversely lead to a greater relative focus on seeking high-level (vs. low-level) support. That is, when prompted to interact with a distal (vs. proximal) support provider, people should be more likely to seek high-level (vs. low-level) support. Experiment 3 tests this prediction.

### **Experiment 3: What Level of Support Do People Seek Under a Contractive (vs. Expansive)**

#### **Scope?**

Experiment 3 examined how scope influences the levels of support people seek. The functional association between level and scope proposes that expanding regulatory scope (i.e., considering a broader set of support providers to include more distal others) should prompt seeking high-level support, whereas contracting regulatory scope (i.e., considering a narrower set of support providers to focus on proximal others) should prompt seeking low-level support.

Here, participants imagined receiving support from two support providers who differ in social distance (i.e., proximal vs. distal). Interacting with a proximal support provider should prompt people to contract regulatory scope, whereas interacting with a distal support provider should prompt them to expand regulatory scope (e.g., Trope et al., 2020; Wakslak & Joshi, 2020).

Participants then indicated the extent to which they would want to receive high-level and low-level support from each support provider. Based on our theoretical framework, we hypothesized that people who imagined interacting with a more distal (vs. proximal) support provider would prefer to receive high-level (vs. low-level support) given the association between scope and level of support.

## Method

**Participants.** MTurk workers in the United States responded to an online survey in exchange for \$1 ( $N = 1026$ , 597 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 40.38$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.91$ ). Sample size was determined by following the effect size from a pilot study ( $\eta p^2 = .01/f = .10$ ). An a priori power analysis using G\*Power indicated that to achieve 80% power with this effect size, a total 992 participants was needed. In anticipation of some participants not meeting the inclusion criteria, we oversampled to recruit 1032 participants. Sample size, procedure, and data analysis plan for this study were all preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/~ccrLAW6Jj4>).

**Measures and Procedure.** To test our prediction, we adapted the scenarios from Experiment 2. To provide cover story for asking support from socially proximal and distal others, participants were instructed to imagine that they had just moved to a new city for a new job. As in Experiment 2, half of the participants read a scenario in which their lack of motivation was causing them to feel stressed (Survey version A), whereas the other half read a scenario in which stress was causing them to feel not motivated (Survey version B). To manipulate scope via

social distance, participants imagined asking support from a hypothetical close friend (proximal condition) or a new, but supportive acquaintance (distal condition). We chose to have participants imagine receiving support from a hypothetical person rather than someone in their actual network because it allowed us to control for several factors that can influence their support decisions (e.g., prior experience with the support provider, availability, interdependence, trust, etc.). In the proximal condition, participants read the following prompt:

*Luckily, one of your closest friends—Jamie (same gender as you)—will be in town to visit you. You and Jamie have known each other for a long time; the two of you often go on trips together and share multiple hobbies. You feel comfortable confiding in Jamie. You know Jamie is always eager to help people.*

In the distal condition, participants read the following:

*Luckily, you have a new acquaintance—Jamie (same gender as you)—to ask for help. You got to know Jamie a little through a mutual friend. You've heard nice things about Jamie, but you have not spent much time with her/him and do not know her/him well. Nevertheless, you heard that Jamie is always eager to help people.*

All participants imagined and visualized consulting Jamie about their problems over dinner.

Subsequently, we gave them a brief description of low-level support and high-level support.

*According to recent research, there are two approaches people typically take to deal with adversity:*

*One approach is to focus on treating the symptom of the problem (i.e., low motivation in this scenario). This often involves understanding how the stressor is impacting you and focusing on removing this problem. Typically, this is achieved*

*by engaging in a conversation that can identify the symptom and address it so that it no longer bothers you.*

*Another approach is to focus on treating the root cause of the problem (i.e., stress in this scenario). This often involves understanding what is causing your problem and focusing on removing this problem. Typically, this is achieved by engaging in a conversation that can identify the cause and remove it so that it does not lead to more problems.*

Participants indicated their willingness to ask Jamie for low-level support and high-level support (“Assuming Jamie is available, capable, and willing to help, how likely are you to consider asking Jamie to help you treat the symptom (cause) of your problem?”) using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely). Additionally, we asked participants to choose between the two levels of support (“If you had to choose only one problem to discuss with Jamie, which one would you focus on?”; 0 = symptom, 1 = cause). As a manipulation check, we asked participants to rate how close they are to Jamie on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all close, 7 = very close).

## **Results**

**Exclusions.** Based on the exclusion criteria described earlier, the final  $N$  for this study was 1022. Sensitivity power analyses using G\*Power revealed that this  $N$  provides 80% power to detect an effect of  $f = .10$  and 90% power to detect an effect of  $f = .12$ .

**Manipulation Checks.** Our social distance manipulation was successful. Participants reported that they are closer to Jamie in the proximal (vs. distal) condition,  $F(1, 1020) = 2608.44$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $d = 3.19$ .

**Main Analyses.** Based on our preregistered analysis plan, we conducted a 2 (level of support: low vs. high) X 2 (distance: proximal vs. distal) repeated-measures ANOVA with levels

of support as a within-participants (i.e., repeated) factor and distance as a between-participants factors on the endorsement for support rating. First, there was a main effect of support level ( $F(1, 1020) = 31.00, p < .0001, \eta p^2 = .03, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.22, .46]$ ), in that participants endorsed high-level support ( $M = 5.07, SD = 1.67$ ) more than low-level support ( $M = 4.73, SD = 1.70$ ).

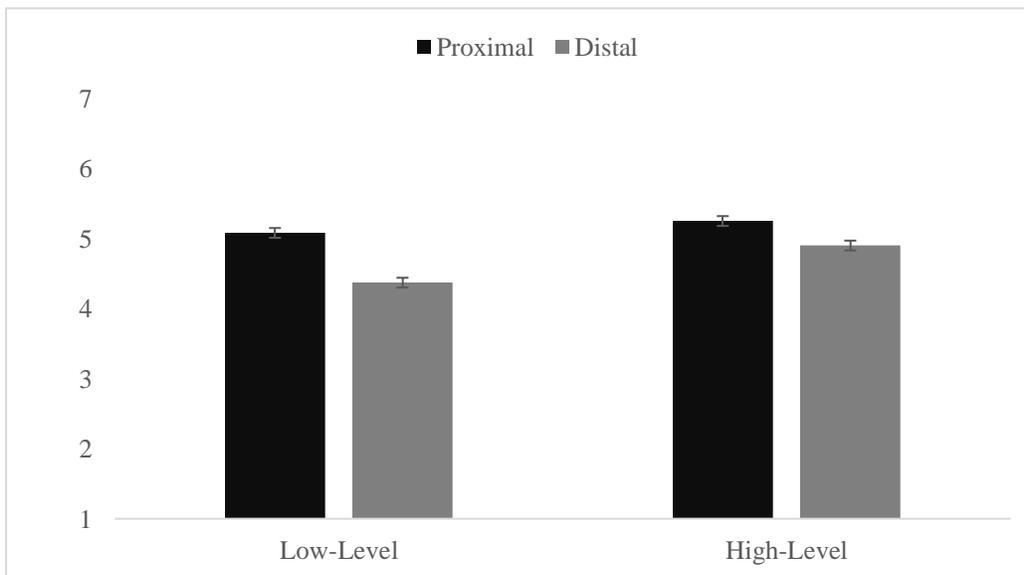
Unsurprisingly, there was a main effect of distance ( $F(1, 1020) = 40.38, p < .0001, \eta p^2 = .04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.37, .70]$ ), in that participants preferred to receive support from Jamie as a close friend ( $M = 5.16, SD = 1.62$ ) than Jamie as an acquaintance ( $M = 4.63, SD = 1.70$ ).

Critically, there was a predicted significant level of support X distance interaction indicating that the relative preference for high-level support to low-level support was greater when Jamie was an acquaintance (i.e., distal condition) than when Jamie was a close friend (i.e., proximal condition),  $F(1, 1020) = 8.39, p = .004, \eta p^2 = .008$  (see Figure 1). Simple effect analyses revealed that participants preferred to receive low-level support from a close friend ( $M = 5.08, SE = .07$ ) than from an acquaintance ( $M = 4.37, SE = .07$ ),  $F(1, 1020) = 46.90, p < .0001, \eta p^2 = .04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.51, .91]$ ; however, this preference for the close friend ( $M = 5.25, SE = .07$ ) to the acquaintance ( $M = 4.89, SE = .07$ ) was reduced for high-level support,  $F(1, 1020) = 11.68, p = .001, \eta p^2 = .01, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.15, .56]$ .

Further analyses examining the relative differences per each support provider across levels of support showed that participants preferred to receive high-level support ( $M = 4.89, SE = .07$ ) to low-level support ( $M = 4.37, SE = .07$ ) from an acquaintance,  $F(1, 1020) = 35.67, p < .0001, \eta p^2 = .03, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.35, .69]$ ; however, the difference between high-level support ( $M = 5.25, SE = .07$ ) and low-level support ( $M = 5.08, SE = .07$ ) was not significant for a close friend,  $F(1, 1020) = 3.58, p = .059, \eta p^2 = .004, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.006, .33]$ .

To make sure that our findings are not driven by survey version, we additionally conducted a 2 (level of support: low vs. high) X 2 (distance: proximal vs. distal) X 2 (survey version: A vs. B) repeated-measures ANOVA with levels of support as a within-participants (i.e., repeated) factor, and distance and survey version as between-participants factors on the endorsement for support rating. These results revealed that survey version ( $p = .76$ ) and its interaction with distance ( $p = .57$ ) did not influence the support endorsement ratings. Importantly, survey version did not moderate the observed levels X distance interaction ( $p = .17$ ), suggesting that our results are likely to be driven by levels (vs. contents) of support.

As an exploratory analysis, we examined participants' choice to receive between low-level support or high-level support. A binary logistic regression with distance (coded as 0 = distal and 1 = proximal) predicting levels of support (0 = low-level, 1 = high-level) revealed a significant effect,  $B = -.35$ ,  $SE = .14$ , Wald's  $\chi^2 = 5.85$ ,  $p = .016$ , odds ratio (OR) = .71, indicating participants in the distal (vs. proximal) condition were more likely to choose high-level support (77.4% vs. 70.8%) than low-level support (22.6% vs. 29.2%).



*Figure 1.* Endorsement of low-level and high-level support across social distance in Experiment 3. Error bars represent one standard error above and below the mean.

## **Discussion**

Consistent with our theoretical framework, Experiment 3 demonstrated that thinking about interacting with a proximal (vs. distal) support provider led to a greater relative focus on receiving low-level support to high-level support. In conjunction with results from Experiment 2, these findings indicate that the notion of level can extend beyond how people construe events to how people seek support from their support network and corroborate the hypothesized bidirectional association between levels of support and scope.

By having participants imagine receiving support from a hypothetical person for a hypothetical problem, Experiment 3 allowed for additional experimental control over additional processes (not central to our research) likely involved in support seeking (e.g., prior experiences or interdependence, problem severity or controllability, support provider availability). Although this provides a rigorous test of our hypotheses, it does introduce artificiality. To complement this approach, Experiment 4 sought to enhance the ecological validity by having participants ponder support seeking for an ongoing problem from their actual support network.

### **Experiment 4: Support Seeking in the Real World**

Experiment 4 sought to enhance the ecological validity of our findings. To this end, we examined support seeking for an actual goal participants have. Also, given the possibility that people may consider multiple individuals for support, we asked participants to nominate multiple support providers. Here, instead of reading a hypothetical scenario, participants indicated an ongoing problem they would like to address. We manipulated levels of support by having participants come up with one cause and one effect of their own problem. Then, participants were asked to nominate multiple individuals from whom they would like to receive low-level

(vs. high-level) support. Based on our theoretical framework, we hypothesized that participants' nominees for low-level (vs. high-level) support would be more socially proximal (vs. distal) collectively.

## Method

**Participants.** MTurk workers in the United States responded to an online survey in exchange for \$.50 ( $N = 130$ , 76 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 36.82$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.17$ ). Sample size was determined by following the effect size from a pilot study ( $d = .41$ ). An a priori power analysis using G\*Power indicated that to achieve 80% power with this effect size, a total of 117 participants was needed. In anticipation of some participants not meeting the inclusion criteria, we oversampled to recruit 130 participants.

**Measures and Procedure.** In the beginning of the study, participants were instructed to describe one ongoing problem or challenge in their life (“*issues related to your career, finance, health, social life, personal goals, etc.*”). Their ongoing problem ranged from issues related to finance (e.g., “*I need money for my basic needs and to help support my family...*”), health (e.g., “*...ongoing problem in my life has been my personal goal of eating healthy...*”), career (e.g., “*I recently lost my job and am currently looking for a new one...*”), and social (e.g., “*Quite recently, I’ve had a serious disagreement with my stepmom...*”).

Depending on their randomly assigned condition, participants either completed the effect portion of the study first or the cause portion of the study first. We first provided them with an example of an effect (a cause) of a problem:

*Every problem tends to have its effect (cause). For example, imagine that you have been overwhelmed with work (feeling exhausted lately). One possible effect (cause) of this*

*problem is that you are constantly feeling exhausted (you've been overwhelmed with a lot of work).*

Participants were then instructed to describe one effect (cause) of the problem they described earlier.

Subsequently, we asked participants to provide initials of four people in their life they could ask to help deal with the effect (cause) of their problem. Because some nominees may share the same initials, we asked participants to type in their first name and their last initial when applicable. Once the nomination of the support network was completed, we asked participants to indicate how close they are to each nominee on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all close*, 7 = *very close*). We averaged these social distance ratings across the four nominees for low-level support ( $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 5.58$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) and the four nominees for high-level support ( $\alpha = .69$ ,  $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). Participants also indicated to which relationship category each of their nominee belongs (i.e., romantic partner, immediate family, close friend, extended family, colleague, acquaintance, and other). The study employed a within-participants design, and the order in which participants completed the portion for the effect vs. the cause of their problem was randomized.

## Results

**Exclusions.** Based on the exclusion criteria described earlier, the final  $N$  for this study was 121. Sensitivity power analyses using G\*Power revealed that this  $N$  provides 80% power to detect an effect of  $d = .26$  and 90% power to detect an effect of  $d = .30$ .

**Main Analyses.** We conducted a paired samples t-test to test our hypothesis. Consistent with our hypothesis, social distance ratings were lower for low-level support network ( $M = 5.60$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) than high-level support network ( $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ),  $t(121) = 2.36$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $d$

= .16, 95% CI = [.03, .34]. Thus, even when prompted to think of multiple support providers (i.e., support network), the need for high-level (vs. low-level) support led participants to think of a support network that is more distal (vs. proximal).

As an exploratory analysis, we also examined the nature of participants' relationship with the chosen support provider nominees. Based on a predetermined categorization, we coded the categories of romantic partner, immediate family, and close friend as *proximal other* (coded as 0) and extended family, colleague, and acquaintance as *distal other* (coded as 1). For our exploratory dependent variable, we computed the total number of distal support provider nominees for high-level support ( $M = 1.02$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) and low-level support ( $M = .82$ ,  $SD = .96$ ). A Wilcoxon signed rank test revealed that a high-level (vs. low-level) support network included a higher number of distal (vs. proximal) support provider nominees,  $z = 2.61$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $r = .17$ , 95% CI = [.001, 1.00].

## **Discussion**

Experiment 4 sought to enhance the ecological validity of our findings by examining how levels of support are associated with multiple individuals in people's actual network who can help with an ongoing problem. Consistent with our predictions, participants thought of support providers who were more distal (vs. proximal) when seeking high-level (vs. low-level) support. Here, we posit that the need for low-level support likely contracted participants' scope and oriented them to think of support providers who are socially proximal; the need for high-level support also likely expanded scope and oriented participants to think of more socially distal support providers. Collectively, findings from Experiments 2-4 provide evidence for the proposed bidirectional relation between levels of support and scope.

Importantly, the association between levels of support and scope indicates a possibility that people may approach proximal and distal others with different expectations to receive specific levels of support. For example, the contractive scope when interacting with proximal others may lead people to expect more low-level (vs. high-level) support relatively; the expansive scope when interacting with distal others may lead to more high-level (vs. low-level) support relatively by comparison. Given that support that matches recipients' needs or expectations is often perceived to be more responsive (Cavallo et al., 2016; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Zee et al., 2020), people may appreciate proximal (vs. distal) others more when they are provided with low-level (vs. high-level) support. Experiment 5 sought to test this possibility.

#### **Experiment 5: Implications of Receiving Low-level (vs. High-level) Support under Contractive (vs. Expansive) Scope**

In this study, we examined one implication (i.e., feelings of gratitude) of receiving low-level and high-level support when people have contracted (vs. expanded) scope. Based on our findings that people more strongly associate low-level (vs. high-level) support relatively more with contractive (vs. expansive) scope, we hypothesized that participants would report feeling more gratitude when they expect to receive low-level relative to high-level support from their proximal (vs. distal) others. Thus, we predicted a distance X level of support interaction on gratitude about the expected support, based on prior research showing that support that addresses recipients' needs is perceived to be more responsive (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Zee et al., 2020).

To test the above prediction, Experiment 5 used the validated hypothetical scenario from Experiment 1 (i.e., lack of motivation causing depressed mood).<sup>2</sup> Participants were randomly assigned to imagine that they had received either low-level or high-level support. Importantly,

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<sup>2</sup> Because Experiment 5 was conducted prior to Experiments 2 and 3, it used a scenario with the wording "depressed mood" rather than "stress".

half of these participants were also randomly assigned to imagine that this support came from a socially proximal other vs. a distal other. We predicted that compared with when receiving support from a distal other, participants would report feeling more gratitude when they imagine receiving low-level (vs. high-level) support from a proximal other.

## Method

**Participants.** Three hundred and fifty-six participants (213 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 36.40$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.49$ ) from MTurk were recruited to participate in an online survey in exchange for \$.50. Prior to data collection, we used G\*Power to conduct an a priori power analysis based on a pilot study ( $\eta^2 = .03/f = .18$ ). This initial analysis indicated that a sample size of 344 provides 80% power to detect a significant effect; we intentionally oversampled and aimed to collect 360 participants. This study employed a 2 (level of support: low vs. high) X 2 (distance: proximal vs. distal) between-participants design.

**Measures and Procedure.** To manipulate social distance, we used a name generator approach from prior research (see Kalkstein et al., 2016; also see Hislop, 2005; Kammarath et al., 2020; Wellman & Frank, 2001). Here, participants were instructed to nominate ten people in order of closeness to them (1 = *closest*, 10 = *least close*). Then, we manipulated social distance by having participants imagine receiving support from their *second* closest nominee (i.e., proximal condition) and their *ninth* closest nominee (i.e., distal condition). Subsequently, participants read one of the hypothetical scenarios used in Experiment 1 (i.e., low motivation causing depressed mood) and imagined receiving support. Participants in the low-level (high-level) support condition read:

*You approach [initials of 2<sup>nd</sup> (vs. 9<sup>th</sup>) closest nominee] for some help. Although [initials of 2<sup>nd</sup> (vs. 9<sup>th</sup>) closest nominee] acknowledges your low motivation (feeling depressed),*

*[initials of 2<sup>nd</sup> (vs. 9<sup>th</sup>) closest nominee] mostly focuses on helping you feel better (become more motivated).*

*For example, [initials of 2<sup>nd</sup> (vs. 9<sup>th</sup>) closest nominee] has sent you some popular articles on how to reduce stress (how to motivate yourself) and called you several times to cheer you up (invited you several times to join him/her on activities that might give you more energy).*

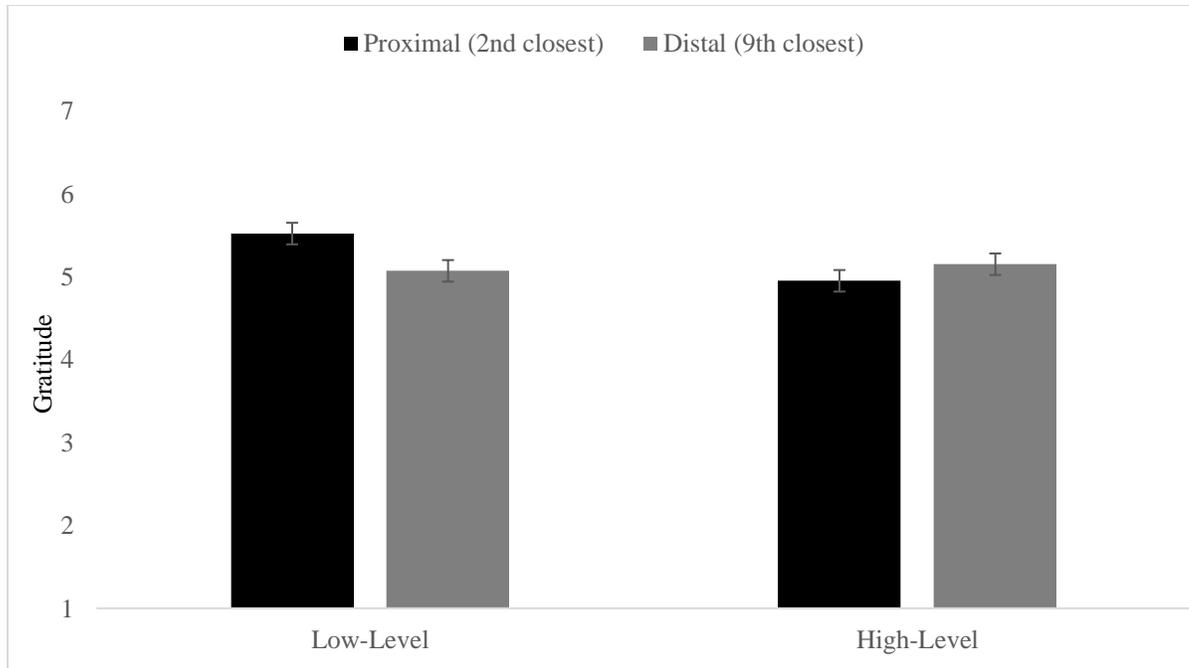
Participants were randomly assigned to imagine receiving support from their 2<sup>nd</sup> closest vs. 9<sup>th</sup> closest nominee. Next, participants were instructed to imagine how they would feel after this interaction and indicate their level of gratitude. Specifically, using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*), participants indicated the extent to which they would feel grateful, appreciative, and thankful that their nominee has given them low-level (high-level) support. Using the same scale, participants also indicated the extent to which they would feel disappointed, misunderstood, and frustrated that their nominee has not given them high-level (low-level) support (reverse-scored). These six gratitude-related items were highly reliable ( $\alpha = .85$ ), so we created a composite variable of *gratitude* ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). To ensure that the nominees differed on social distance, we asked participants to rate how close they are to each nominee on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very close*).

## Results

**Exclusions.** Based on the exclusion criteria described earlier, the final  $N$  for this study was 343. A sensitivity power analysis using G\*Power revealed that this  $N$  provides 80% power to detect an effect of  $f = .15$  ( $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ) and 90% power to detect an effect of  $f = .18$  ( $\eta_p^2 = .03$ ).

**Manipulation Check.** Participants reported that they are closer to their 2<sup>nd</sup> closest nominee than to their 9<sup>th</sup> closest nominee,  $t(342) = 28.55, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.38, 2.73]$ , indicating that our social distance manipulation was successful.

**Main Analysis.** We conducted a 2 (level of support: low vs. high) X 2 (distance: proximal vs. distal) between-subjects ANOVA on gratitude. The results revealed a non-significant effect of level of support,  $F(1, 339) = 3.77, p = .053, \eta_p^2 = .01, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.01, .51]$ . The effect of distance on gratitude was not significant,  $F(1, 339) = 1.64, p > .20$ . As predicted, there was a significant distance X level of support interaction,  $F(1, 339) = 6.12, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .02$ , indicating that the difference in expected gratitude when receiving low-level (vs. high-level) support was greater when it was imagined to have come from the 2<sup>nd</sup> closest nominee than the 9<sup>th</sup> closest nominee. Simple effects analyses revealed that participants reported they would feel more gratitude for receiving low-level support when it was expected from a proximal other ( $M = 5.55, SD = 1.20$ ) than a distal other ( $M = 5.06, SD = 1.21$ ),  $F(1, 339) = 9.56, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .03, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.21, .94]$ ; participants did not differ in their gratitude for receiving high-level support whether it was expected from a proximal other ( $M = 4.97, SD = 1.20$ ) or a distal other ( $M = 5.13, SD = 1.20$ ),  $F(1, 339) = .15, p > .70$ . Further analyses examining the relative differences per each level of support in the two distance conditions revealed that participants reported that they would feel more gratitude receiving low-level support from a proximal (vs. distal) other,  $F(1, 339) = 6.99, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = .02, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.13, .85]$ ; however, there was no significant difference in gratitude in the two distance conditions for receiving high-level support,  $p = .40$  (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Gratitude when expecting to receive low-level (vs. high-level) support across social distance in Experiment 5. Error bars represent one standard error above and below the mean.

## Discussion

Experiment 5 sought to test one implication of the scope – levels of support link by testing the hypothesis that support recipients appreciate proximal (vs. distal) support providers more when provided with low-level (vs. high-level) support. Results from Experiment 5 corroborated this prediction. These results suggest, then, that the proposed scope – levels of support link may guide how people evaluate the support that they receive – perhaps shedding light on why support at times backfires (Bolger et al., 2000; Feng & Magen, 2016; Gleason et al., 2008; see Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). These results may also offer new insights into the dynamics that influence judgments of how responsive support providers are, with implications for relationship satisfaction (e.g., Cutrona, 1996; Lemay et al., 2007). We elaborate on these issues in the General Discussion section.

## General Discussion

The present research sought to shed light on social support processes by examining how a novel distinction of social support is associated with support providers across social distance, as well as its implications. Extending prior research on construal level, Experiment 1 demonstrated that people can distinguish social support based on the notion of levels. Building on this novel distinction, Experiment 2 showed that being prompted to seek low-level (vs. high-level) oriented people toward support providers who are socially proximal (vs. distal) to them. Experiment 3 demonstrated that thinking about interacting with a socially proximal (vs. distal) support provider led to a greater relative focus on seeking low-level relative to high-level support. Experiment 4 enhanced the ecological validity of our findings by showing the association between levels of support and scope involving actual goals and support providers. Testing the implication beyond support provider selection, Experiment 5 found that support recipients expected to feel different levels of gratitude depending on whether they imagined receiving low-level (vs. high-level) support from a proximal (vs. distal) other.

In a recent extension of construal level theory, Trope and colleagues (2020) proposed that people have developed a number of mental and social tools that modulate scope. Our findings provide preliminary evidence that social support needs may expand or contract the scope of support providers that people consider. The need for low-level support contracts one's scope to focus on a narrower set of support providers consisting of proximal others; the need for high-level support expands one's scope to consider a broader and more diverse set of support providers including more distal others. Conversely, contracting (vs. expanding) scope leads to a greater relative focus on receiving low-level (vs. high-level) support. These results contribute to an emerging work that examines the bidirectional relation between levels and scope in interpersonal contexts (Joshi et al., 2016, 2019; Yudkin et al., 2020; see Wakslak & Joshi, 2020

for a review). This is the first evidence that we are aware, though, that specifically suggests that social support processes may serve as important social tools for expanding and contracting people's relational scope.

Our predictions and interpretations of the current findings are based on a theoretical framework that posits a functional relation between scope and levels of support (Trope et al., 2020). When seeking low-level support, it makes sense to look to people who are proximal and within one's immediate surroundings. Low-level support is highly contextualized and thus would be best exchanged between proximal others who may be similar, close, or familiar with the needs of one another. In contrast, when seeking high-level support, it is more functional to expand one's scope. High-level support is decontextualized and focuses on the central aspects of a stress experience that remains unchanged across its various instantiations. When seeking high-level support, the particular reactions to the stress experiences of each individual are less relevant; thus, it makes sense to be more inclusive of distal others in the search for a support provider. However, this does not mean that high-level support should be exclusively linked with distal others. Rather, the function of high-level tools is to allow people to expand their consideration of possibilities beyond the here-and-now (Ledgerwood et al., 2015; Kalkstein et al., 2016; Trope et al., 2020). Thus, high-level support merely increases the chance of selecting a distal provider through broadening the diversity of the consideration set to include distal others.

Similarly, when seeking support from proximal others, it is feasible to focus on low-level support, which allows one to navigate one's immediate environment. However, the more psychologically distal a support provider (who does not have the intimate knowledge about the support seeker), the more different their immediate surroundings will be and thus the less likely that receiving low-level support from that person will be relevant enough to help address the

support seeker's idiosyncratic needs. Thus, when seeking support from distal others, it would make more sense to receive high-level support from them because they can provide support that is more applicable across a broader array of stress experiences any individuals can have. By extracting the central and defining features of the stress experience (e.g., cause of the problem), high-level support may facilitate exchange of support between distal others.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations of the present research that need to be considered. First, the present research relied on the broad construct of social distance (i.e., the removal of another from the self) to represent relationships with those who are socially proximal versus distal. Although our focus on social distance was necessary to test the relation between scope and levels of support, we acknowledge that reducing the distinction between close and distant relationships to the broader construct of social distance may leave out many aspects of the complex interdependence characterizing close relationships (e.g., Agnew et al., 1998; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). Because support seeking in close relationships are likely to be influenced by several additional processes (e.g., commitment level, partner characteristics, joint outcomes), future research should examine how different levels of support are exchanged between romantic partners and how it influences their relationship outcomes in a dyadic setting (Holmes, 2002; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

Second, the present research assessed and manipulated scope indirectly through social distance. We made this decision for two reasons. First, we know of no validated direct assessments of scope. In most empirical research, scope is generally manipulated or measured via psychological distance (e.g., Trope et al., 2020). The close correspondence between distance and scope makes these methodological decisions reasonable. Second, our primary interest was

the implications of the association between scope and level for social relationships—focusing on social distance as our operationalization of scope allowed us to tie more closely this theoretical work on scope to this particular domain of research. As research on regulatory scope develops, it will be necessary to manipulate and assess regulatory scope more directly.

## **Implications and Future Directions**

### ***Implications for Social Support Research***

One major contribution of the present research is in its introduction of a novel distinction of social support by levels. To this end, we showed that what distinguishes high-level and low-level support is the structural relation between cause and effect (i.e., level) and not the specific content that makes up the support (e.g., emotionality vs. instrumentality). Indeed, people prioritized high-level support to low-level support across situations in which the contents that make up high-level support (i.e., reduce stress) and low-level support (i.e., boost motivation) were reversed (Experiment 1). Similarly, being prompted to seek low-level (vs. high-level) support contracted (vs. expanded) scope regardless of its content (Experiment 2). Contracting (vs. expanding) scope via social distance also led to relatively more focus on receiving low-level (vs. high-level) support independent of the support content (Experiment 3). Thus, the notion of support levels is novel and distinct from other categorizations of support (e.g., emotional vs. instrumental support; emotion-focused vs. problem-focused coping).

More importantly, although this is by no means the first attempt to categorize a variety of support behaviors into meaningful distinctions (e.g., emotional vs. instrumental support, visible vs. invisible support), we believe that the association between levels of support and psychological distance provides an integrative framework that allows researchers to systematically predict and test novel hypotheses in social support research. First, decades of

research on construal level theory have shown that all four dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., social, temporal, spatial, hypothetical) are interrelated (Maglio et al., 2013; Trope & Liberman, 2010). If so, one may expect other psychological distance dimensions to be similarly associated with levels of support. For instance, people may focus on receiving low-level (vs. high-level) support when they expect to receive support sooner (vs. later). Seeking support from a provider who is spatially distal (vs. proximal) may lead recipients to focus on receiving high-level relative to low-level support (e.g., long distance relationships). Interestingly, our theoretical framework also allows for testing the possibility that the same support provider can be associated with different levels of support depending on the support seeker's psychological distance to them (e.g., seeking support from a friend now vs. later; seeking support from a spouse when physically together vs. apart). Future research can fruitfully examine these questions.

Second, while the present research focused on the distinction of cause and effect as *one instance* of the notion of levels of support, additional distinctions can be applied to the notion of support levels. Just as levels of construal capture a variety of ways people mentally represent events (Trope & Liberman, 2010), we propose that levels of support should also encompass a wide range of instances addressing people's needs. For example, high-level (vs. low-level) support may entail providing negative (vs. positive) feedback (Belding et al., 2015), giving idealistic (vs. practical) advice (Baskin et al., 2014; Danziger et al., 2012; Liberman & Trope, 1998), or tending to primary (vs. secondary) concerns (Fujita et al., 2008; Liviatan et al., 2008). If this is the case, additional predictions can be made. For example, people may appreciate it more when proximal (vs. distal) others give positive feedback (vs. negative, constructive feedback). Expansive scope may facilitate seeking idealistic (vs. practical) advice from others.

***Implications for Support Exchange across Different Social Contexts***

### **Close Relationships**

Our finding that support seekers' scope influences what levels of support they expect from specific others presents an intriguing dilemma for support providers, especially in close relationships. Consider, for example, Gisele wants to provide support to her spouse, Tom, who suffers from low confidence due to being overweight. On the one hand, Gisele (who is more psychologically removed from Tom's issue compared to Tom) may realize that Tom's weight issue is the root cause for his low self-confidence and may want to provide diet tips or motivate Tom to exercise. However, the psychological proximity between Gisele and Tom may lead Tom to expect low-level support more from Gisele (e.g., help with enhancing his self-confidence). If Gisele only focuses on providing high-level support, it is likely that her support efforts would be underappreciated or perceived as unresponsive by Tom—an implication suggested by Experiment 5. This miscalibrated expectation may partly explain why enacted support in close relationships sometimes backfires (Bolger et al., 2000; Feng & Magen, 2016; Gleason et al., 2008; see Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). Importantly, our findings suggest that this miscalibration may be partly due to providers' failure to modulate scope to match the recipients' needs rather than the lack of prosocial intention to help (Brock & Lawrence, 2009, 2014; Lorenzo et al., 2018; Marigold et al., 2019). Thus, support providers may need to consider their partner's perspective and adjust support provision accordingly.

Marriage and close relationships experts have recently brought to attention that people may not be satisfied in their marriage because they expect their spouse to unrealistically fulfill too many different roles (Finkel et al., 2014; Finkel, 2017; see Perel, 2017). Corroborating this over-reliance on close others for multiple needs, studies show that support seekers typically only approach one to two support providers for a particular problem (Armstrong & Kammrath, 2015).

Central to this trend is the idea that proximal (vs. distal) others are likely to be multi-final (i.e., being able to address multiple problems) because they have more intimate knowledge and expertise about each other (Eastwick et al., 2019; see Finkel, 2017; Finkel et al., 2014).

Extending this idea, our findings show that not only are proximal others more likely to be sought out for support in general, but also that they may be particularly sought after for low-level support (Experiment 3). Importantly, the results from Experiment 5 suggests that people may hold their proximal others especially accountable when they fail to give low-level (vs. high-level) support. Thus, part of the dissatisfaction with one's spouse may have to do with the *types* of support that is missed. In this vein, future research may test how different levels of support are associated with relationship satisfaction.

Our work also suggests that one solution to this problem of unrealistically expecting spouses to fulfill multiple roles may be addressed by interventions that encourage individuals to expand regulatory scope, helping them identify how distal others may be able to address their support needs. Our work suggests, for example, that it may be beneficial to guide partners through exercises that expand regulatory scope prior to generating potential support providers – particularly when the needs for which support is being sought concern high-level rather than low-level. These exercises might include activities that leverage the correspondence between scope and psychological distance: such as imagining the distant past or future, thinking about physically remote locations, and/or elaborating on unlikely or hypothetical events. In this way, this work may not only have implications for theory, but also practical applications.

### **Ingroup vs. Outgroup**

Because similarity is also a determinant of social distance (Liviatan et al., 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), the current theoretical framework has implications for support seeking in

intergroup contexts as well. In general, ingroups are perceived as similar and more socially proximal than outgroups (e.g., Brewer & Weber, 1994; Turner et al., 1987). Thus, it is possible that people may associate high-level (vs. low-level) support more with outgroups (vs. ingroups). Although people are much more likely to seek support from ingroup (vs. outgroup) members for a variety of reasons (e.g., trust, frequency of interaction), outgroup members may be called to mind disproportionately more when one's scope is expanded (vs. contracted). Similarly, when seeking support from outgroup (vs. ingroup) members, people may focus on receiving high-level (vs. low-level) support (e.g., addressing the cause, seeking constructive feedback vs. compliments). Thus, beyond dyadic relationships, the present research may also have important implications for intergroup dynamics as well.

***Implications for Social Relationships and Well-Being: Flexible Modulation of Scope***

From our theoretical perspective, a support network composed of proximal and distal social relationships may be beneficial by allowing people to flexibly modulate their scope to address varying needs. Specifically, people may benefit from expanding their scope to reach out to a broader set of people when they need high-level support (e.g., access to novel and decontextualized information). However, contracting scope to focus one's search for support providers to a narrower set of people may be more beneficial when low-level support is needed (e.g., access to more personalized, contextualized information). Thus, it is possible that people enjoy more satisfying relationships and support outcomes if they can utilize their network "properly" by modulating scope adaptively. This view is consistent with findings that people who diversify their emotion regulation needs (e.g., having distinct relationships for dealing with sadness vs. anxiety) experience higher well-being (Cheung et al., 2015). Similarly, research on social integration has shown that people who have diverse types of supportive relationships

enjoy better mental and physical health (e.g., Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009; Thoits, 2011). In this vein, future research may identify the processes that influence people's ability to effectively utilize their support network—for example, the knowledge about whether expansive or contractive scope would be beneficial for a given goal (see Nguyen et al., 2019 for research on “metamotivational” knowledge; also see Scholer & Miele, 2016) or personal characteristics such as attachment styles (Armstrong & Kammrath, 2015) and self-esteem (Marigold et al., 2019).

Given the potential benefits of flexible modulation of scope, what leads people to expand or contract scope in the real world? As theorized, scope is modulated by one's needs to address concerns that span across psychological distance (i.e., from “here-and-now” to “there-and-then”). For instance, consider planning a trip in a near (vs. distant) future. In the former case, one needs to contract scope to consider possibilities relevant in the here-and-now (e.g., At which hotel in Miami should I stay?). Accordingly, one may reach out to a narrower set of proximal others for travel tips or recommendations (e.g., those who have recently been to Miami). In the latter case, one can expand scope to consider a broader range of possibilities (e.g., To which city should I travel?). Accordingly, one may reach out to a broader set of others (including distal ones) for travel tips or recommendations (e.g., those who have recently vacationed).

### **Conclusion**

The present research introduces a novel distinction of social support based on the notion of level. In social support contexts, high-level support that addresses the cause of the problem is more central to the problem than low-level support that addresses the effect of the problem. Whereas the motivation to seek low-level support contracts one's scope to consider support providers who are proximal, the motivation to seek high-level support expands one's scope to consider support providers who are distal. Similarly, whereas contracting one's scope facilitates

seeking of low-level support, expanding one's scope facilitates seeking of high-level support.

The implications of the bidirectional relation between levels of support and scope present an intriguing opportunity for future research.

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