

# Evaluation of Mother's Support and Offspring's Depressive Symptoms

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## Introduction

- ❖ Mothers are a mainstay of support for grown offspring as they provide both emotional and instrumental support frequently. Studies of support have shown that parents might feel it is the norm for them to provide some assistance to children in trouble (Suitor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). However, receiving “high-levels” of support may reduce the offspring’s well-being (Thomas, 2010) by generating feelings of incompetence (Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008).
- ❖ Grown children also may feel pressure to conform to norms of support. Based on equity and reciprocity theory, offspring who receive more support (over benefitting) than they have provided or provide more support than they receive (under benefitting), suffer more depressive symptoms (Gleason et al., 2008). Additionally, Uchino (2009) found that evaluation of support is associated with psychological outcomes more than actual received support.
- ❖ In this study, we investigated how offspring’s evaluation of their mother’s support is associated with the offspring’s depressive symptoms and well-being. We hypothesized that offspring who evaluate their support as “about right” will benefit from better well-being compared to their peers who evaluate their support as “too little” or “too much.”

## Data and Sample

- ❖ This study used data from *The Family Exchanges Study* (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009). The study started in 2008 and recruited middle-aged adults with at least one living parent and one adult offspring in the Philadelphia area. After the middle-aged adults participated, they provided names and contact information for their children and parents. The sample included 592 offspring who reported on their mothers and themselves via online survey or phone interview.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of the Grown Children and Their Parents*

Variables	Grown children		Mothers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	23.82	5.13	49.75	5.42
Years of education	13.81	2.10	13.82	2.67
Physical Health	3.70	0.96	3.33	1.03
Income	3.77	1.61	–	–
<b>Proportions</b>				
Male	.45		.48	
Racial/ethnic minority	.35		.35	
Student	.47		–	
Married	.15		.81	
Parent	.24		1.0	
Employed full time	.45		.59	
Coresidence	.54		–	

## Measures

- ❖ **Evaluation of Support:** Grown children evaluated the amount of support they received from their mothers. Responses were rated from 1 (*less than you would like*) to 5 (*more than you would like*) with 3 being “*about right*” (Fingerman et al., 2012b). We recoded the variable as 1 = *about right* and 0 = *more or less than you would like*.
- ❖ **Depressive Symptoms:** Grown children rated the extent to which they felt lonely, blue, worthless, hopeless about the future, or had no interest in things, using a 5-point scale. Responses were rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) (Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012a). We calculated an average score across these 5 items.
- ❖ **Control Variables:** 7 demographic characteristics of participants were considered as control variables: (1) age, (2) physical health (rated from 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*), (3) income (rated from 1 = *less than \$10,000* to 6 = *more than \$100,000*), (4) gender (1 = *male*, 0 = *female*), (5) coresidence (1 = *coresiding with mother*, 0 = *not coresiding with mother*), (6) minority status (1 = *racial/ethnic minority*, 0 = *non-Hispanic White*), and (7) student status (1 = *student*, 0 = *not student*).

## Results

- ❖ We estimated a multiple regression model to examine the association between offspring’s evaluation of mothers’ support and their depressive symptoms.

Table 2

*Multiple Regression Model Predicting Offspring’s Depressive Symptoms from Evaluation of Mother’s Support*

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	2.62***	0.24
Evaluation of mother’s support	-0.17**	0.07
<b>Covariates</b>		
<b>Offspring variables</b>		
Age	-0.02*	0.01
Gender	-0.07	0.06
Minority	-0.11	0.06
Physical health	-0.12***	0.03
Coresidence	0.12	0.07
Student status	-0.03	0.07
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.06	

## Discussion

- ❖ Findings revealed that offspring reported significantly fewer depressive symptoms when they viewed mother’s support as “about right” compared to when they viewed mother’s support more or less than what they would want.
- ❖ We believe this could be due to the fact that offspring are concerned with norms of support. Previous research has shown us that evaluation of support as well as evaluation of norms of support is very important to psychological outcomes (Gleason et al., 2008; Uchino, 2009) and our findings are consistent with this. When offspring evaluate the support they are receiving as about right perhaps they are basing this off their perception of what a normal amount of support to receive is.
- ❖ This study suggests the importance of examining subjective perception of parental support and its consequences for well-being.
- ❖ Future research could explore offspring’s evaluations of father’s support.

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