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

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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., 2021), 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, social network, social distance

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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., coworkers, 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 partners 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 promoting mental and physical health

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resources, validation, visualization, writing of original draft, and writing of review and editing.

All study materials and data have been made publicly available at the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at: https://osf.io/u9nqw/?view_only=082e3ce64ccd477b86ea023fc8776d7a.

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