The Relationship between Social Support and Psychological Problems among Students

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Abstract

This study was conducted to examine the relationship between social support and psychological problems i.e. depression, anxiety, and stress. 120 undergraduate university students were involved in this study. They were selected using purposive sampling technique. The Social Support Behaviour (SSB) scale was used to measure the level of social support among students and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) was used to measure the level of depression, anxiety, and stress among students. Correlation coefficient was used to measure the relationship between social support and psychological problems. The findings of this study revealed that there were significant negative relationship between social support and psychological problems suggesting that the higher the social support, the lower is the psychological problem. The findings of the study will be useful in assisting educators, counsellors, psychologist, and researchers to develop strategies to enhance student psychological well-being.

Introduction

Social support is an aspect that should be reviewed since it is described as both a buffer against life stressors as well as an agent promoting health and wellness (Dollete, Steese, Phillips, & Matthews, 2004). Research has shown that social support plays an important role in managing psychological problems. Lack of social support has been found to be one of the factors that lead to many psychological problems among students.A growing number of literature and empirical research have indicated the relationship between social support and psychological problems among students. Therefore, this study attempts to understand the role of social support in managing the psychological problems faced by the students based on the following reasons.

First, social support is very much important for individuals in their life. Deficits in social support have been shown to be related to many psychological problems such as depression, loneliness, and anxiety (Eskin, 2003). Elliot and Gramling (1990) found that social support helps the college students to lessen depression, anxiety, and stress. They also found that social support could help the students manage and lessen their psychological problems. Thus, this study is to understand how social support could play its role in dealing depression, anxiety, and stress is essential.

Second, social support has also been recognized to have significant impact on the achievement of the students. Since family and friends are the individuals' first source of reference, supports from these two sources have been found to give a significant influence on academic achievement (Steinberg & Darling, 1994; Cutrona, 1994). The support received by the students could help to decrease their psychological problems since they feel that someone is there to help them, thus helping them to perform well in academic life. By having knowledge on how social support could help students to excel in study and cope with any psychological disturbances, much information could be derived to enhance the amount of support provided. Third, this study also hopes to contribute to the research on how to help and manage students' academic achievement. By having better understanding and knowledge about social support in relation to psychological condition of the students, it could help us to design and organize proper development program to help them. Since social support is very much important to students, this study will also help family, especially parents, understand their roles in helping their children so that they can help the students to decrease their psychological problems.

Social Support

Social support refers to the experience being valued, respected, cared about, and loved by others who are present in one's life (Gurung, 2006). It may come from different sources such as family, friends, teachers, community, or any social groups to which one is affiliated. Social support can come in the form of tangible assistance provided by others when needed which includes appraisal of different situations, effective coping strategies, and emotional support. Social support is an element that can help individuals to reduce the amount of stress experienced as well as to help individual cope better in dealing with stressful situations. Several studies indicated that supportive contacts correlate negatively with symptoms and psychological disorder such as stress, depression and other psychiatric disorder, and positively correlate with physical and mental health. A study by Nahid & Sarkis (1994) for example found that social support protects people in life crisis such as bereavement, illness, and other major stress, and moderates the effect of stressors on psychological well being.

It has long been recognized that the characteristics and quality of social support are central to the individual's adjustment. The quality of social support perceived and received has been reported by several studies to correlate more positively with mental health than the quantity of support received (e.g. Nahid & Sarkis, 1994; Holahan et al., 1995). To understand the role of perceived and received social support in dealing with mental health, we have to look into the research on the stress-buffering effect which focus on both types of social support. The former refers to the belief that helps are available if needed whereas the latter refers to the actual helps obtained. Both of these are thought to protect against stress by decreasing the extent to which situations are perceived as a threat to well-being and increasing the belief that necessary resources are available. Investigation of mechanisms underlying the stress-buffering effect of social support has focused on how social support influences stress-related appraisals and coping (Lakey & Cohen, 2000).

Social Support and Psychological Problems

Support from family and friends have been found to reduce the impact of psychological problems among students (Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2006). Villanova and Bownas (1984) for example found that social support could help students to cope with everyday life stressor and lighten the burden of academic workload. Without enough support from family and friends, they would be in trouble and are vulnerable to depression, stress and anxiety. This finding was supported by Dollete et al. (2004) who found that social support could act as a protective factor that could decrease psychological problems among students such as stress. A study by Wentzel (1998) found that social support provides motivational influence on students' performance. This study is supported by the findings by Quomma and Greenberg (1994) who found that less social support from these sources would lead to failure. Furthermore, a negative correlation between anxiety, stress, and depression, and social support has been reported by Nahid and Sarkis, (1994) in that low level of support have been associated with high level of anxiety, stress, and depression in college students.Social support was found to be one of the most important protective factors for students (Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2000).

This is because social support includes social resources that individuals perceive to be available or that are actually offered to them which could help protect against psychological problems. According to Teoh and Rose (2001), lower level of social support is one of the predictors of psychological problems. It is associated with higher level of depression, anxiety, attention problems, thought problems, social problems, somatic complaints, and lower self esteem. These notions are supported by the study of Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) on 128 first year undergraduate students. It was found that students who perceived that their social resources increased had lower level of psychological problems. This shows that the impact of a stressful situation for example can be decreased when students have good social support. Advice and encouragement from sources of support may also increase the likelihood that an individual will rely on active problem solving and information seeking. These may assist students in dealing with various stressors in the environment and facilitate a positive adjustment process. The supportive actions provided by the social support are thought to buffer the impact of stress by increasing the effectiveness of coping efforts, which in turn decrease distress among students (e.g., Holahan, et al., 1995; Lakey & Cohen, 2000). For example, receiving emotional support and companionship may encourage effective adaptation among students in facing and coping with uncontrollable events.

A study by Rawson, Bloomer and Kendall (1994) on 184 undergraduate students for example, found that students with good social supports tend to have lower scores on stress compared to the students with low social support. This study has found that coping behavior and social support structures moderate the effects of stress among students in their academic life.Since social support was found to buffering effect of stress, it could decrease the use of harmful disengagement coping strategies such as avoidance, withdrawal, and denial among students. Consequently, it can increase the use of beneficial engagement coping strategies because individuals believe their social network includes someone who is willing to listen (Fleishman, Sherbourne, Crystal, Collins, Marshall, Kelly 2000; Tao, et al., 2000). It also influences response to social stressors by providing a basis for positive thinking and cognitive restructuring or by encouraging people to believe they have resources to call on if they wish to distract themselves from a painful situation (Calvete, & Connor-Smith, 2006). In a cross-sectional study, Holahan et al. (1995) found first-year students with higher levels of perceived parental support were better adjusted (i.e., higher well-being and happiness) and less distressed (i.e., less depression and anxiety) than those with lower levels of perceived parental support.

There are three dimensions of support provided by family and friend that is warmth, behavioral control, and psychological autonomy-granting. These three dimensions facilitate the development of positive self-conceptions and social skills, responsibility and competence, and impulse control and deterrence of deviance which in turn lead to low level of psychological problems the students. This support has also been found necessary for healthy level of development (Oswald & Suss, 1994). For example these two sources of social support, i.e. family and friends, are the predictor of individual's psychological well-being. The combination of family and friend support with acceptance and emotional warmth has been associated with higher grades in school and college, less misconduct, less psychological distress, and less delinquency among students of all social classes which would produce significant effects on adolescence academic achievement (Silbereisen & Todt, 1994). From the previous research, it could be concluded that social support from family and friends plays an important role in dealing with psychological problems because supports provided by family and friend could lower down the psychological problems on students. This means that the higher the social support, the lower are the psychological problems. Otherwise, the lower is the social support, the higher are the psychological problems.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are generated:
H1: Social support will negatively correlate with depression.
H2: Social support will negatively correlate with anxiety.
H3: Social support will negatively correlate with stress.

Methods

a. Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 120 (60 males and 60 females) undergraduate university students. They were selected using purposive sampling technique. For the purpose of the study, the participants were divided into two groups, low and high achieving groups. The age range of the participants was 20 – 25 (mean= 22.5 (SD=1.32).

b. Research Instruments

The booklet of structured questionnaire given to the participants consisted of scales that assessed their level of depression, anxiety, stress, and social supports. The contents for each dimension selected for the purpose of this study are as follows:

Social Support

The Social Support Behaviors Scale (SSB) was used to measure social support. The SSB is a 45-item instrument designed to measure social support; emotional, socializing, financial assistance, practical assistance, and advice/guidance. The SSB is designed to assess available supportive behaviors and to do so separately for family and friends. The scale applies 5-point likert scale. The scale options are: 1 = no one would do this, 2 = someone might do this, 3 = some family member/friend would probably do this, 4 = some family member/friend would certainly do this and 5 = most family members/friends would certainly do this.

The higher scores indicate higher social support. The SSB has very good internal consistency with Cronbach Alphas that exceed .85 for several college samples. In this study, coefficient alpha values were .89 for the social support from family, and .79 for the social support from friends.

Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) was used to measure depression, anxiety, and stress. The DASS is designed to assess aspects of depression, anxiety and stress using a multidimensional approach in adolescents and adults (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). It is a 42-item self-report measure. Items fall into three scales; Depression (D), Anxiety (A), and Stress (S) with 14 items per scale. Each item is scored from 0 ("did not apply to me at all") to 3 ("applied to me very much, or most of the time") in terms of how much the item applied within the past week. In this study, coefficient alpha values were .92 for depression and anxiety, and .93 for stress.

b. Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics used in this study were frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Person product moment correlations were used to determine the strength and direction of relationship among the variables; social support and psychological problems.

Results

a. Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Background of Participants

A total of 120 Malaysian university undergraduate students participated in this study. Of these 120 participants, 60 (50%) were male and 60 (50%) were female. In terms of their age, 9 (7.5%) participants were 20 years old, 15 (12.5%) were 21 years old, 38 (31.7%) were 22 years old, 33 (27.4%) were 23 years old, 14 (11.7%) were 24 years old, and 11 (9.2%) were 25 years old. The mean age of the participants is 22.5 (SD=1.32) and the age range of the participants is between 20 – 25 years old. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in the Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 120)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Respondent Characteristics		
1. Gender		
Male	60	50
Female	60	50
2. Age		
20 years old	9	7.5
21 years old	15	12.5
22 years old	38	31.7
23 years old	33	27.4
24 years old	14	11.7
25 years old	11	9.2
3. Year of Study		
First year	24	20.1
Second year	40	33.3
Third year	34	28.3
Fourth year	22	18.3

b. Relationship between Variables

Social Support and Depression

Correlation coefficient was computed between social support and depression. Social support was found to significantly and negatively correlate with depression ($r = -0.66$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the higher the social support, the lower is the depression.

Social Support and Anxiety

Correlation coefficient was then computed between social support and anxiety. Social support was found to significantly and negatively correlate with anxiety ($r = -0.70$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the higher the social support, the lower is the anxiety.

Social Support and Stress

Correlation coefficient was computed between social support and stress. Social support was found to significantly and negatively correlate with stress ($r = -0.71$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the higher the social support, the lower is the stress. The above findings on the relationship between social support and psychological problems indicate that there exist significant negative correlations between social support and depression, social support and anxiety, and social support and stress. It was found that the higher the social support, the lower is the psychological problems. Table 2 summarizes the correlations among the variables.

Table 2
Correlations among variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Social Support	1			
2. Depression	-0.66*	1		
3. Anxiety	-0.70*	0.90*	1	
4. Stress	-0.71*	0.89*	0.94*	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Discussion

The present study was conducted to examine the relationship between social support and psychological problems. 120 undergraduate students, both males and females were selected as participants in this study. The variables tested were gender, age, and level of study for demographic characteristics, while social supports and psychological problems were tested for psychological construct. It was hypothesized that (1) social support will negatively correlate with depression, (2) social support will negatively correlate with anxiety, and (3) social support will negatively correlate with stress. Correlation coefficients were conducted to test these hypothesis and the analyses yielded anticipated results. As predicted, the results indicated a significant negative relationship between social support and depression, social support and anxiety, and social support and stress. These correlations suggested that the higher the social support, the lower the psychological problem. These findings certainly support the previous research findings. Several studies revealed that social support correlate negatively with psychological problems such as stress, depression and other psychiatric disorders (e.g. Friedlander et al., 2007; Holahan et al., 1995; Nahid & Sarkis, 1994). The impact of psychological problems could be reduced when the students when the students have good and sufficient social support.

This is because the existence of social support may assist students in dealing with various stressors in their academic life and facilitate a positive adjustment process (Rawson et al., 1994). Another studies suggested that students with high social support would perceive their decreased psychological problems (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Thus, the existence of good social support can reduce the extent to which situations are perceived as a threat to well being. Social support was found to be one of the protective factors for students that could reduce the amount of psychological problems (Toa, et al., 2000). This notion was supported by Nahid & Sarkis (1994) that social support could protect people from psychological problems. A study by Steinberg and Darling (1994) also indicated that social support from family and friends influence students' well-being in which these supports were found to positively affect the academic life. A study by Wentzel (1998) found that support from family and friends had predictive value related to students' well-being and pro-social goal. In another study, social support was considered to buffer the effect of psychological problems (e.g. Flieshman et al., 2000; Tao et al., 2000). Dollete et al. (2004) found that the roles of social support are very important because it is considered as a mechanism to buffer against life stressors and promote health and wellness. This finding support the research findings in which the social support could reduce the effect of psychological problems of individuals thus lead to psychological well being.

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Therefore, the findings of the present study provided evidence for the relationship between social support and psychological problems among students. The relationship between these two variables was anticipated as the two constructs were found significantly correlated in the previous studies.

Implications of the Study

This study provides empirical evidence with regards to positive effects of social support in managing psychological problems among students. Specifically the findings suggested that an increase in social support may lead to decrease psychological problems among students. By having knowledge and understanding on this area, it could help many parties, such as educators, counselors, and psychologist to design and develop proper intervention program to reduce psychological problems among students. The finding of the study can help to design programs and strategies to boost students' performance in academic life. The students themselves could benefit from the study. Information and ideas gained from this research could help them to face, manage, and handle the psychological problems. Therefore, enhancing knowledge and strategies in controlling psychological problems among students may help to increase their academic achievement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study provides significant information pertaining to the relationship between social support and psychological problems among students. The finding of the study clearly indicated that there were significant negative correlations between social support and psychological problems. This finding further supports the importance of recognizing and managing social support, so as not to let the psychological problems affect students' academic performance. Students and educators should be aware of the importance of social support and existence of psychological problems so that these problems might be under control.

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