PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT, COPING CAPABILITY AND GENDER DIFFERENCES AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

TAM CAI LIAN
Sunway University College
No. 5, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Sunway
46150 Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan
Tel: +60(3)74918622 Ext. 3851
Fax: +60(3)56358633
cltam@sunway.edu.my

LIM SWEE GEOK
International Medical University (IMU)

ABSTRACT

Perceived social support and coping capabilities are important predictors which give an insight into how different individuals deal with stressful situations in life. Studies have reported that different genders address the variables differently. Thus, this research aims to find out how well perceived social support predicts the coping capability of early adulthood. 300 respondents were tested with 2 scales: Perceived Social Support Scale which consists of Friend scale (PSS-Fr), Family scale (PSS-Fa), and Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (A-COPE). The age range of respondents was from 16 to 26 years old. Questionnaires were distributed to several secondary schools, colleges, and university students within the   Klang Valley, Malaysia. The result indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between perceived social support and coping capability. In addition, perceived social support from family played a more important role in determining coping capability. Furthermore, it was found that perceived social support from females differed significantly from males in the analysis of t test. In addition, results also revealed that there were significant gender differences for young adult's coping capability whereby females were generally better coping had capability, as compared with males.

Key words: perceived social support, coping capability, early adulthood, gender differences

INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to college or university is a major experience in every person's life. It yields many opportunities of psychosocial development and learning experiences for students (Tao et al., 2000). However, it can also bring forth a number of stressful circumstances for students including academic demands, increased independence and responsibility, homesickness, adaptation to the new environment and financial difficulties. Consequently, excessive stress can havoc in createone's health, emotions, work performance, relationships and personal development.

Nowadays, many young adults smoke, take drugs, alcohol or other substances to avoid stressful events (avoidant coping). Drugs are often associated with a larger pattern of maladjustment in both adolescents and adults (Miller & Brown, 1997). In Malaysia, Melati (1998) reviewed the common factors that lead to rising stress levels among youths and

concluded that apart from transition pressure, schools related issues, peer pressure, family and parenting are among the common stressors. Conflicts with parents, heavy loads of homework and the intense urge to conform to peers were the common issues faced by adolescents. Thus, social support plays an important role in a person's physical and psychological health in buffering the impact of stress.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Social Support and Coping Capability

Social support provides the most important and significant environmental resources. It is defined as a mutual network of caring that enables one to cope with stress better. Social support from friends and family plays an important role in almost every aspect of stress and coping. In addition, social support refers to: having a group of family and friends who provide strong social attachments; being able to exchange helpful resources among family and friends; and the feeling of having supportive relationship and behaviors (Hobfoll & Vaux, 1993). A study involving almost 300 volunteers exposed to the flu virus, revealed that those who had fewer friends were more likely to get sick. Those with more friends were the least likely to catch the cold from the flu virus (Cohen, Doyl, & Skoner, 1997).

Furthermore, 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 techniques may assist students in dealing with various stressors in the environment and facilitate a positive adjustment process (Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995). To measure social support, individuals' perceptions are commonly studied. Perceived social support refers to a person's perception of readily available support from friends, family, and others. It also shows the complex nature of social support including both the history of the relationship with the individual who provides the supportive behavior and the environmental context (Hobfoll & Vaux, 1993).

The term coping refers to adaptively changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage psychological stress. It identifies the ways in which people handle and manage stressful situations. It involves managing troublesome circumstances, expelling effort to solve life's problems, and seeking to master or deal with problematic situations. On the other hand, coping strategies include problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and seeking social support (Kohlman, Weidener, Dotzauer, & Burns, 1997). The common ways to find out how people cope is to ask them to report, by filling up questionnaires, interviews or written texts, about things they do to manage their concerns or stress.

Gender has been defined as a cultural construct which distinguishes the roles, behavior, mental and emotional characteristics between males and females (Keller, 1991). In addition, Shettima (1996) defined gender as roles and actions ascribed to women and men so as to distinguish who they are, what is expected of them by the society and how they related to each other for meaningful coexistence.

Furthermore, early adulthood is a time where coping is very important, as many new experiences and responsibilities are thrust upon individuals. They need to cope in a variety of settings, including school, home, peer groups and with a range of life problems

such as examinations (Erikson, 1980). In this present study, the operational definition of age range for young adulthood is from 16 to 26 years old.

There are numerous tests of how coping is mediated by the relations between strands in the individual's perceived support network. The distress has shown that coping, partially or fully, settles the effect of perceived support on symptoms. One study of the effect of stressful daily events on a person's frame of mind, found that social support reduces the duration of the negative effect, such as sadness and disappointment created by stressful events (Caspi, Bolger, & Eckenrode, 1987). Another finding revealed that the use of negative or unfriendly coping strategies may provoke unsatisfactory support, which may in turn elicit further maladaptive coping responses (Holahan et al., 1995). This implies that there is a close relationship between perceptions of appropriate social support from family and friends, and positive coping capability.

Other research shows that there is a close relationship between social support and coping capability. Up to 20% of university students experience depression during their undergraduate education (Daughtry & Kunkel, 1993). Researchers discovered from a cross-sectional study that first year university students who has more perceived social support from family members could cope better with their surroundings and studies, compared to those who have less perceived social support (Holahan et al., 1995). Furthermore, in a one year longitudinal study, it was found that those who were given social support by family and friends could actually cope better in a new surrounding and situation (Halamandaris & Power, 1999). Other researchers have found that students who are in the higher educational level have higher social support and coping capabilities compared to those who are in lower levels of education. Research has also revealed that secondary school students who are, at puberty, generally are less mature when compared to university students. These adolescents face more parent-child conflict and consequently they perceive less social support from their families (Halamandaris & Power, 1999).

Tam (2008) conducted a survey on 378 undergraduates from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman and Sunway University College, Malaysia, and found that adolescents who perceived higher social support from family and friends had higher level of competence and self-esteem. It is suggested that despite the different ethnic groups and culture in Malaysia, social support plays an important part in developing an individual's coping capability. Tam (2008) suggested that good relationships among siblings and parents indirectly would provide more perceived social support. With this in mind, it can be assumed that good family functioning provides better social support. Thus, the contributions of social support from family appear more prominent than peers among adolescents in the Malaysian context.

Researchers have consistently found that social support helps individuals to cope with stress (Holtzman, Newth, & Delongis, 2004). Stress in daily life can affect individual psychological as well as physical health. On the other hand, good mental health is well maintained by how people cope with stressful events. Transition from secondary school to Pre-U or University is indeed stressful and considered as part of the big changes that occur on early adulthood. Some of the stressors among college students are separation from family, adaptation of new environment, and the beginning of new relationships. In one study, there are at least one-third of all students who meet the criteria of depression and anxiety across different cultures (Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2006). Their difficulties of managing stress can lead to a weak academic performance and increased psychological distress (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001).

In sum, social support does play an important part in determining successful coping capability according to research evidences as described above.

Gender Differences for Perceived Social Support

Gender plays a part in perceived social support. According to Sharir, Tanasescu, Turbow and Maman (2007), who studied quality of life in psychiatric patients, females are more likely to receive social support from friends and significant others, than males are. For example, femailes receive more frequent and longer visits from their friends than males. Longer visits might be indicators to the patients of the amount of care and support the friends are providing. Besides, during longer visits, more words, feelings and thoughts can be exchanged, making the whole visit more significant to the females.

Similarly, it was revealed in a study by Cumsille and Epstein (1994) that females have been found to receive more perceived social support from their friends than their male counterparts. One explanation could be that females are more emotional as compared to males; thus they might be able to share their feelings more freely and readily with friends. By doing so, the females perceive having someone to talk to as having adequate social support. On the other hand, males are expected to live up to certain social expectations that have been set and that if they were to share their feelings, it would be deemed as a sign of weakness. Hence, males tend to perceive lower social support because they are more likely to feel that they have no one to express their feelings to.

Moreover, Kendler, Myers and Prescott (2005) who studied on 1,057 opposite-sex dizygotic twin pairs stated that females tend to have larger social contacts as compared to males. They also emphasized that the females have higher social support because they seek emotional support in their relationship, while the males only receive social support from their spouses and colleagues.

Nonetheless, it can be concluded that perceived social support is more prevalent in females as compared to males. Females, who are more likely to stay in the same clique and share personal talks more likely to perceive higher social support as compared to males.

Gender Differences for Coping Capability

Gender differences in coping capability have been found among adolescents. Female adolescents reported higher scores of coping capability than males (Hampel & Petermann, 2005). Hampel and Petermann (2005) in their research also revealed that females used less distraction and more aggression than their male counterparts. Other studies of Frydenberg and Lewis (1993) found that females had higher scores in avoidant coping. According to Griffith, Dubow and Ippolito (2000), females tend to show more active approach coping strategies when compared to males. It has been reported by Greenglass, Burke and Konarski (1998), that women make more effective use of their social support network to cope with stress.

Tanck and Robbins (1979) examined the coping responses of college students to academic pressures and found that men were more likely than women to seek sexual gratification and drugs, whereas females ruminated. Overall, the common coping responses for both genders was similar, such as interpreting sources of stress, taking direct action, and seeking for sharing. Further, Stone and Neale (1980), using an open-ended response format

to assess appraisal of and coping with daily events, found that males were more likely to adopt direct action as compared with females, who were more likely to use distraction, relaxation, religion and other coping strategies. In contrast, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) interviewed 100 normal adults on a monthly basis and showed that males and females did not significantly differ in their coping behaviours.

In conclusion, although evidence varies, coping capabilities in both genders seems to vary with each gender having their own distinctive coping patterns.

Aim of Study and Research Hypotheses

Based on the above evidence, it appears logical to make the inference that young adults' perceived that social support influences their coping capability. Social support from family would be one's basic source of social support. However, as one grows older, the chances of leaving one's own family to further one's studies increase. Thus, it would be harder to obtain the essential social support from family. As an alternative, one would then turn to friends for social support. The literature reviewed above has generally revealed that females perceived higher social support as compared to males. However, coping capability seemed to vary with each gender. The aim of the study is thus to investigate the effects of social support that young adults perceive on their coping capability and the comparison of both variables among males and females.

To summarize, the present study has been designed to investigate the effects of perceived social support on the coping capability of young adults. Specifically, the study focuses on the following research hypotheses:

1. The higher the level of perceived social support, the better the coping capability of young adults.
2. Female young adults would perceive higher level of social support than males.
3. Female young adults would have better coping capability than males.

METHOD

Subjects

There were 300 participants involved in this study with 148 (49.3%) males and 152 (50.7%) females. The 300 participants were selected randomly from 450 participants who have filled up consent forms and volunteered to participate in the survey. The data was collected from several secondary schools, colleges, and universities in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Ten research assistants were in charge of data collection for a period of 3 months (August-October 2007).

Statistical Tests

To answer the three hypotheses of this study, correlation, linear regression and t tests were used to calculate the results. In this study, gender formed the independent variable whereas both perceived social support and coping capability formed the dependent variables.

Measurement Instruments

The Perceived Social Support- Friends Scale (PSS-Fr) and Perceived Social Support-Family (PSS-Fa) (Procidano & Heller, 1983) are two 20-item and 19-item instruments to measure fulfillment of social support from friends and family. The normative data that derived in this instrument was from a sample of 222 (mean age=19 years) undergraduate psychology students. The mean and standard deviation of PSS-Fr was 15.15 (SD= 5.08) and PSS-Fa was 13.40 (SD= 4.83). This instrument has 3-point Likert-type scale which are "Yes", "No", and "Don't know". The reliability found for the PSS-Fr and (PSS-Fa) with alphas ranging from 0.88 to 0.91 and 0.84 to 0.90. Both the PSS-Fr and PSS-Fa have good concurrent validity. High scores reflect more perceived social support. The PSS has an excellent internal consistency, with an alpha of .90.

       Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experience (A-COPE) (Patterson & McCubbin,, 1991) is an instrument used to measure adolescent coping behavior. A-COPE contains 54 items. Subject rated whether each item applied "1= Never", "2= Hardly ever", "3= Sometimes", "4= Often" and "5= Most of the time". The A-COPE is easy to sum up for total score with items 7, 8, 24, 28, 42, 46, 49 reversed-scored. Summing the respondent's score for each of the items would derive an adolescent's coping score for the subscales of ventilating feelings, seeking diversions, developing self-reliance, developing social support, solving family problems, avoiding problems, seeking spiritual support, investing in close friends, seeking professional support, engaging in demanding activities, being humorous, and relaxing. High scores reflect better coping capability. The subscales of A-COPE have a good internal consistency, with alphas that range from 0.50 to 0.75. The A-COPE has a fair predictive validity.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to three different levels of students located in Klang Valley, Selangor, Malaysia. A criterion for inclusion into the survey group was early adults with range of age 16-26 years old. The participants were also selected to obtain 3 groups at different educational levels. 100 participants from several secondary schools were selected randomly from 150 participants whereas another 200 participants were selected randomly from 350 Pre- University and undergraduate students. The participants were required to fill in the survey forms on the spot and thereafter handed over the form once it had been completed. However, a few participants wished to bring the survey home and returned the forms the next day. All the participants answered the questionnaires. QThe Questionnaire consists of the consent form, demographic information, Perceived Social Support Family and Friend Scale (PSS-FR and PSS-FA) and the Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problems Experiences (A-COPE).

RESULTS

See Table 1 presents details about the sample. The age range for the participants being tested was between 16 to 25 years old. The mean age was 18.49 years (SD=1.80). There were 100 (33.3%) Form 4 and 5 secondary school students, 100 (33.3%) Pre-U students and 100 (33.3%) university students. For racial rate, there were 80.3% Chinese, 2.7% Malays, 4.0% Indians and 13.0% of other races.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistic of Respondents' Profile

Description		No of Subjects	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	148	49.3
	Female	152	50.7
Race	Chinese	241	80.3
	Indian	12	4.0
	Malay	8	2.7
	Others	39	13.0
Educational Level	Secondary School Level	100	33.3
	Pre-University Level	100	33.3
	Undergraduate Level	100	33.3

Pearson Correlation between Perceived Social Support and Coping Capability shows that there is a moderate significant positive relationship between perceived social support and coping capability (r = .41 p<.01). Hence, the higher perceived social support, the greater the coping capability. See Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between Social Support and Coping Capability

Variables	r
Social support	
	.41(**)
Coping capability	

** p < .01

Table 3. Hotelling's T^2 of Perceived Social Support (PSS) and Coping Capability (A-COPE) by Gender Status

Variables	Mean Scores		
	Males	**Females**	**t (298)**
Perceived Social Support	21.86 (7.55)	24.55 (7.35)**	-3.13**
Coping Capability	168.01 (16.80)	173.33 (17.28)**	-2.70**

**p<.01

To compare perceived social support and coping capability among males and females, Hotelling's T^2 was carried out. Females received more social support as compared with males [t (298) = -3.13, p < .01]. There were also significant differences for coping capability whereby females were generally having better coping capability as compared with males [t (298) = -2.70, p < .01]. See table 3.

  Regression was conducted out to determine the effect of perceived social support from both friends and family on coping capability. Besides perceived social support, the effect of other variables which included gender, nationality, religion, race, educational level and age were also being explored. See table 4.

Table 4. Regression of Independent Variables and Coping Capability (A-COPE)

Variables	B (Unstandardized Coefficients)	SE (Unstandardized Coefficients)	ß (Standardized Coefficients)
Gender	5.153	9.890	.150**
Nationality	2.968	1.912	.064
Religion	-5.587	3.445	-.093
Race	-5.427	3.349	-.119
Educational Level	.271	2.369	.007
Age	2.644	2.630	.066
Perceived Social Support from Friends	-.312	.221	-.089
Perceived Social Support from Family	-.688	.165	-.261**

** p<.01

DISCUSSION

This research found that there was a significant relationship between young adults' perceived social support and their coping capability. The results suggest that the higher the young adult's perceived social support, the higher her or his coping capability. Thus, the first hypothesis is accepted. Higher perceived social support will help early adults to have higher coping capability compared to those who has lower perceived social support.

Young adults' perceived social supports differed significantly with the status of gender. Based on the result from this research, it was found that males differed significantly from females in terms of social support. Therefore, the second hypothesis which stated that there will be a significant difference between young adults' perceived social support among males and females is supported. In addition, there were also significant difference in terms of coping capability between males and females. This indicated that the third research hypothesis was accepted.

Early adulthood is a period in which permanent coping mechanisms are developed. It is evident that stress has harmful effects on physical health, mental health and social life of a student. If high levels of stress is reported by undergraduate students, there will be a significant decreased in satisfaction and increase in physical health problems as compared to those with lower levels of stress (Thoits, 1995). The use of effective coping mechanisms is the key to alleviate the harmful effects of student's stress. Hence, the current study helps to understand how social support from friends and family would affect coping capability of early adults which are represented by secondary school, pre-university and undergraduate students.

The results suggest that when there is more social support from friends and family, students would have higher stress coping capability. This supported research findings that social support is a fundamental support for everyone and it effects how people can cope with their stressors (Dwyer & Cummings, 2000). Stress is produced when pressure exceeds one's perceived ability to cope. Moreover, stress will soften one's performance in every domain if they do not know which mentioned that social support has a direct influence on personal emotion (Tao et al., 2000). Transition to the university is in fact a major event that might worsen the emotional problems of students who are living away from home. They will become more stressed than studying in the high school.

Participants with higher level of parental support will tend to have higher levels of happiness and less depressed than those with lower level of parental support (Holahan, et al., 1995). Social support such as advice and encouragement may increase the probability for students to become more prone play an active role in handling stress and problem solving. These techniques can help students in dealing with a variety of stressors that they will face in the environment. Needless to say, social support is crucial for students because its impact can facilitate students' overall performance during the transition to university. Increased social support from friends and family will result in a more effective mechanism in handling stress and problems (Thoits, 1995). A higher level of emotional support from family and friends has been associated with diminishing the effects of stress and depression (Boyteyre, Maurel, & Bernaud, 2007).

Regression showed that perceived social support from family played a more important role than friends in affecting coping capability, but also that each contributed unique components of the variance. Young adults in Malaysia context generally believe that

family members understand them more compared to close friends. Besides, parents often become more involved in the lives of their children as they enter college or university. This is because when their children enter university and take significant steps towards independence, many parents still feel that their role is of more importance.

Hence, our finding which indicated that social support is related to better coping capability is of importance, especially in creating the awareness among parents and community on alternatives in handling stressors among adolescences. If students have difficulty in handling these stressors, this will lead to poorer academic performance and increased psychological problems (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001). Therefore, social support that is given by friends and family are important resources for adolescents who are undergoing the transition to university. Social support from family, especially parents, is one of the important elements that can assist students or young adult with coping capability (Thrunzo & Pinto, 2003). If social support cannot eliminate stressors totally, it can at least help people, to feel more optimistic, more capable of control, less anxious, and more willing to try new ways of coping with stressors.

Gender Differences for Perceived Social Support

The present study is consistent with Sharir et al. (2007) who mentioned that females have higher social support than males. Their results revealed that females received more visits from friends as compared to the male respondents. The results concur with Kendler et al. (2005)who reported that females have higher social support because they received the support from friends, relatives and children while males only received support from their spouse and co-workers.

The significant difference in social support between males and females revealed in the present study was in congruence with the study of Cashwell (1995). Samples used in the research of Cashwell (1995) and our research based on Malaysian young adults showed that more attention tends to be given to daughters than sons. Similarly in social relationships, the females in Malaysia tend to show reliance and intimacy to their family. Therefore the results produced significant differences in perceived social support between the genders.

Gender differences for Coping Capability

In general, the present study revealed significant differences in coping capability among male and female students. Females scored higher in coping capability than males. In line with some studies that showed gender differences in coping capability among adolescent, such as research evidences by Hample and Peterman (2005) which reported that female adolescents had higher scores of coping capability than male. Their reasons of such gender differences in coping capability were quite similar with the present study whereby generally females used less distraction and focused more on aggression than their male counterparts. Result of present study is also in parallel with other studies whereby females seem to have a higher score in avoidant coping (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993).

In accordance with Griffith, Dubow and Ippolito (2000), females tend to show better coping strategies when compared to male. It has also been reported by Greenglass, Burke and Konarski (1998), that women are better with social support network in order to cope with their stress. Findings of current study was congruent with Fiksenbaum and

Greenglass (2000) who stated that when social support increased, the effectiveness of coping strategies would also increase.

Implications

In future research, the equality of the race and ethnicity distribution should be taken into account, especially if research is conducted in a multicultural country such as Malaysia. Furthermore, additional research is needed to examine the generalizability of the current findings to other male and female students which include postgraduate students, and other regions of the country. Finally, future studies should also acknowledge the potential developmental changes in gender differences from childhood to adolescence. Considering the review on gender in coping capability, it is noteworthy that only a few studies deal with the interaction effects such as the combined influence of individual and contextual factors.

The findings from this study can provide useful implications for parents, counselors and educators. As it is evident that perceived social support is correlated with coping capability, it is vital that parents emphasize family support for their children and frequently discuss problems encountered by school-going children. Meanwhile, school and university personnel should also provide services in order to tackle their stressors and improve students' coping capability. The provision of supportive programs in academic institutions such as peer support and mentor-mentee system would be most useful for students. The presence of trained counselors would be an added advantage as their services would not only be restricted to providing professional assistance relating to academic problems but also as an alternative avenue to cope with their personal feelings, frustrations and high expectations from various sources which can be extremely competitive and too much to handle on their own.

CONCLUSION

Though the findings indicated that young adults' perceived social support influences students' coping capability, it is uncertain whether this direction of influence should be inferred. The coping capability of early adults could also be correlated with other factors that might even stronger than the perceived social support itself, for instance the state of mental health and resiliency. However, what is clear enough through this study is that the young adult's perceived social support is important and it does help in creating an atmosphere of capability in coping with either studies, social life, or whatever changes that happened to students in a particular time frame. In conclusion, this research revealed that there is a relationship between perceived social support and coping capability of young adults. The results of this study have also shown that there is a significant difference between perceived social support, coping capability and gender. Females received higher social support than males and female also scored higher in coping capability than their counterparts.

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