Original Paper

Perceived Social Support, Stress and Gender Differences among University Students: A Cross Sectional Study

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Abstract

Background: The transition from high school to a university is a significant milestone in every student’s life. Stress experienced by students can have a detrimental effect on their academic performance. Social support has generally been found to promote psychological well-being, as well as to buffer the effects of stress. Method: The study was conducted in one of the Universities in Malaysia. The study questionnaire was designed to include questions regarding socio-demographic aspects and stress of the students; in addition, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale (MSPSS) that was developed by Zimet was administered. The main aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between Perceived Social Support, Stress and Gender differences among University Students. Results: In this study only a small group of the students scored very low on the Perceived social support scale. A low significant inverse correlation was found between MSPSS and stress. Male students’ experienced greater stress than female students’. Female students had a better perception of social support from their families compared to male students. Conclusion: The fact that, as the level of social support increase the level of stress decrease clearly shows that social support acts as a buffer to stress.

Keywords: Perceived Social Support, Stress and Gender

Introduction

The transition from high school to a university is a significant milestone in every student’s life. This transition is a time of separation which requiring an adjustment on the part of the student and his family. Life transitions, such as university attendance, entail the reconstruction of relations between the individual and the environment. Transitions can be stressful as it requires coping skills to adjust to the new environment and lifestyle. The students may have to struggle with issues of developing competence and identity to the new environment, which could be stressful.

Social support is an important element in students’ life. Social support is a cognitive perception on how an individual perceives the quality of support. The beneficial impact of social support has
been associated with both physical and mental health outcomes\(^3\). Social support is closely related to ties with family, friends, neighbours, and others of significance to the person which includes empathy, concern, caring, love, and trust. The support from family and friends were found to be one of the factors that can influence students’ academic achievement\(^2\). Gurung\(^4\) refers social support as the experience being valued, respected, cared about, and loved by others who are present in one’s life. Social support has generally been found to promote psychological well-being, as well as to buffer the effects of stress\(^5\). It is important to see how social influences impact the stressful experiences in the lives of students. Perceived social support and physical health are two very important factors help the overall well-being of the individual.

The absence of social support shows negative influence on health. The presence of social support helps individual's ability to cope with stress. In a study done by Aris Safree Md Yasin \(^2\), 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.

Social support has been positively correlated with lower levels of overall stress in college students\(^5\). Stress can be defined as any circumstances that threaten or are perceived to threaten one’s well – being and thereby tax one’s coping abilities\(^6\). One form of stress that is constantly being experienced by college students is, stress in relation to academic concerns\(^7\). Academic stress mainly comes from time management, assignments, exams, interpersonal relations, social support, addictions, and career explorations.

Support such as emotional, academic, and financial are tremendous factors in the success of a college student. Some studies have shown that the amount of social support from the university and outside contributors like family, friends and mentors can make a huge impact on a student’s success\(^8\).

According to Lazarus\(^9\), perception of stress depends on the person’s appraisal of the event and the resources the person has in coping with the event. Solberg\(^10\) emphasised the importance of social support, he stated that those who have a high perception of social support experienced less stress. Lack of social support is related to psychological problems such as depression and anxiety\(^11\). Social support reduces the adverse psychological impact of exposure to stressful life events and on-going life strains\(^12\).

The study of perceived social support among students has several significance, it not only allows the understanding of the relationship between mental and physical health but also perceive their own function and their interaction with the environment. The measurement of social supports is critical to investigators interested in the study of social and interpersonal processes that moderate outcomes of mental health interventions\(^13\).

Social integration during periods of high life stress may not only provide sustenance for the psychological well-being of an individual, but might also have a positive impact on a variety of discrete health outcomes\(^14\).

It is well-known that the sexes differ in their need, use, and provision of social support, with women typically both requiring and providing more social support than men\(^15\). The main aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between Perceived Social Support, stress
and gender differences among university students.

Methods

Participants
The study was conducted in one of the universities in Malaysia. The undergraduate students who volunteered to participate in the study were explained about the purpose of the study and implications. The students were assured anonymity and were told to respond honestly. Study was approved by university research committee.

Study design
Questionnaire, and Instrument-rated. The study questionnaire was designed to include questions regarding socio-demographic aspects and stress of the students; in addition, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale (MSPSS) that was developed by Zimet was administered. It is a 12-item scale of adequacy of social support from three specific areas namely family, friends, and significant others. Each of the 3 areas has 4 subscales. Items were measured on 7-point scale from 1 ‘very strongly disagree’ to 7 ‘very strongly agree’. The MSPSS evaluates perceived social support (PSS) from family (FA), friends (FR), and significant others (SO) and quantifies the degree to which respondents perceive support from each of these three sources, namely FA, FR and SO. Lower scores suggest lower perception of social support, while higher scores propose higher perception of perceived social support. Scores are derived by summing the individual items and dividing by the number of items. The MSPSS has very good internal consistency with reported alpha coefficients of 0.91 for the total score and 0.90 to 0.95 for each of the three subscales.

Respondents indicated whether or not they had experienced stress over a period of past 6 months. Five stress related items were listed, problem with parents, problem with close friend or close relationship, academic problems, financial problems and other personal problems. The respondents had to tick mark in which area they felt very stressful. Weighed scores were used to define the level of importance of criteria. The final score was calculated by summing the weighed category scores and dividing by the sum of the category weighs. Scores ranged from 5 to 25.

Sample
The questionnaire and the MSPSS were distributed in class and were collected back upon completion. 480 students were asked to complete the questionnaire only 313 questionnaires were complete in all respects. (Completion rate=65.2%).

Analysis
SPSS version 17 was used to analyse the data.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of students
63% were female students and 37% were male students. Age ranged from 19 to 24 years with a mean age of 19 years. In the age group 19 to 20 years, 30 % were female students and 26 % were male students, while in the age group 21 to 25 years, 23 % were female students and 21 % were male students. A vast majority (51 %) were studying in the first year, 31 % in the second year and 18 % in the third year.
Stress

Figure 1. Sources of Stress

As seen in Figure 1, 26% of the students had stress related to their parents, 12% had stress related to friend or close relationship, 16% had academic stressors, 12% had stress related to their financial problems and a vast majority 34% had other personal factors.

Age and Stress
Those in the age group 19 to 20 years experienced higher stress levels (mean =15.72) compared to those in the age group 21 to 24 years (mean =12.94) (t=2.16 p<0.05).

Gender and Stress
Male students experienced greater stress (mean=14.55) than female students (mean= 13.86) however, t test was not significant.

Social Support
In this study the least score on the MSPSS was 2 and the maximum score was 7. ($\chi^2 = 5.3$, SD=1.13). 5% of the students scored low on the social support scale in the range of (2 to 3), 45% were in the average range (4 to 5). Majority (50%) scored high on the social support scale range (6 to 7).

Gender and Perceived Social Support

Table 1. Differential analysis in perceived social support between genders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Support</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen in Table 1, female university students had a higher perception of social support from their families compared to male students. There was no significant association observed in the way male and female students perceived social support from their friends and significant others.

Correlates
It was intended to see whether MSPSS correlates with stress. A low inverse correlation was found between MSPSS and stress. \( R = -0.43 \) (p<0.01).

Discussion
College students are at critical period when they will enter early adulthood. They not only have to adapt to changes in the transition but also stress in the society. Stress experienced by students can have a detrimental effect on their academic performance. Student in the age group 19 to 20 years who were in the first year perceived stress higher than those in the age group 21 to 24 years, who were in the 2 and 3 year. \( t=2.16 \) p<0.05. In general, the source of stress was troubled relationship with parents, and other day to day issues such as food, transport and living conditions. Stresses caused by personal factors are from defects of personal psychology, behavior, and family conditions. These factors include interpersonal communication, self-care ability, and family conditions. Most students agree that bad relationship with classmates, roommates, and friends of opposite sex will produce stresses. Another reason for stress among the first year students may be that they were away from home and had difficulty in adjusting the new environment. In a similar study done by Nelson et al, it was found that first and fifth year students experienced higher stress compared to students in the middle years. The reported that the first year students experienced more stress because of major life transitions from high school to university, while fifth-year students may have fears about life decisions after graduation. Wen in his paper emphasizes on the students stress management abilities which will enable them to live a healthy life after entering the society.

Several studies have highlighted the relationship between social support and stress among university students. 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. Social support may be described as, having a family and a network of close friends who provide social and emotional attachment, and the feeling of being able to depend on them for all physical and emotional needs. In this study, a small group (5%) of the students scored low on the Perceived Social Support scale.

One of the objectives of this study was to find the relationship between stress and perceived social support among university students. A low significant inverse correlation is seen between stress and perceived social support \( R = -0.43 \) (p<0.01). \( R^2 = 0.18 \). This indicates that the university students who perceived higher social support had lower perception of stress. The extent of variance explained is 18%. The results from this study is similar to the finding from a study done by Deihl et al, who reported a correlation between high perception of social support and low levels of stress.

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. Gender is an important influence on support-relevant social interactions. It may be postulated that, the perceived social support would not differ gender
wise, however ANOVA (F=15.28, p<0.000) showed that there is a significant difference on how the male students perceived social support from the female students. In other words, the perceived social support was not the same for male and female students.

Female students had a higher perception of social support from their families compared to male students. This indicates that female students were close to their family and probably the families were protective. The findings of this study is similar to the study done in Malaysia by Tam et al\textsuperscript{23}, they reported that females perceived significant higher social support than males. Perhaps the male students had negative experiences with their family. Studies done by Gayman et al\textsuperscript{25} indicated that early family experiences, especially negative experiences, were associated with lower perceived family and friend support in young adulthood.

In this study, it was observed that female students perceived social support from friends more than male students however; t-value does not show significance. Findings from a study done by Mitchell et al\textsuperscript{26} showed that female adolescents reported more support from friends. In a study done by Ramaswamy et al\textsuperscript{27}, it was found that girls, compared to boys, perceived friends as providing more social support. It is likely that female students socialized better than male students in seeking help and social support from friends. Gender differences in the structure of perceived social support can be explained by socialization experiences and social roles associated with gender\textsuperscript{24}. In this study no difference was seen between gender and significant others. May be the students did not depend on significant others to meet their emotional needs. Due to lack of significant social support among male students it was observed that they had a higher level of stress compared to female students. It appears that, they may have been rejected by their family and friends.

In sum, this study investigates the relations between social support, stress and gender. Some of the major findings are; students studying in the first year experienced more stress compared to those in the second and third year. Several sources of stress were identified such as stress arising from having difficulties with parents, academic problems, financial problems, other personal problems. The fact that, as the level of social support increase the level of stress decrease, clearly shows that social support acts as a buffer to stress. Female students had a better perception of social support from their families compared to male students and as a result the male students experienced higher levels of stress. Although the protective role of social support is well established in the health literature, antecedents of perceived social support are not well understood\textsuperscript{25}. Findings from this study indicate the need to further explore the social support system in universities. One of the limitation of this study was no standardized scale was used to measure stress.

References


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