

The Relationship between Social Support, Coping Strategies and Stress among Iranian Adolescents Living in Malaysia

Mohtaram Rabbani

PhD Candidate

Faculty of Human Ecology

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Email: mina.rabbani@yahoo.com

Mariani Bintie Mansor, PhD

Senior Lecturer

Faculty of Human Ecology

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Email: mariani@putra.upm.edu.my

Siti Nor Yaacob, PhD

Senior Lecturer

Faculty of Human Ecology

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Email: sitinor@putra.upm.edu.my

Mansor Abu Talib, PhD

Associate Professor

Faculty of Human Ecology

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Email: mansorat@putra.upm.edu.my

Corresponding author: mariani@putra.upm.edu.my

Abstract

The major purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between social support, coping strategies and stress among 150 Iranian adolescents among Iranian adolescents in Malaysia. Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale, the Adolescent Stress Questionnaire and Brief COPE Inventory, which evaluate the various ways people react to stress were employed in this study. The Sobel Mediation Test was conducted to examine the mediation outcome of problem-focused coping strategies on the relationship of social support and stress with insignificant results. Therefore, social support does not significantly impact stress through problem-focused coping strategies ($z = 0.57, p > 0.05$). The Sobel Mediation Test was also conducted to determine the mediation impact of emotion-focused coping strategies on the relationship between social support and stress is significant. So, social support significantly affect stress through emotion-focused coping strategies ($z = 2.29, p < 0.05$). The results of this investigation indicated that problem-focused coping strategies cannot mediate the relationship between social support and stress, but emotion-focused coping strategies can. Additional to the general inverse relationship between social support and stress, the use of emotion-focused coping strategies serves to strengthen the effect of social support with stress. In particular, with increase in stress, students using emotion-focused coping strategies tend to have less stress. This suggests that emotion-focused coping strategies are effective strategies to bring about decreased stress among adolescents. This study confirms the belief that using emotion-focused coping strategies could have a correlation with lower stress among Iranian adolescents and can mediate the relationship between social support and stress.

Keywords: Social support, Coping Strategies, Stress

Introduction

Stress is a situation whereby an individual experiences either positive or negative excitement which results in mental or physiological strain (Aldwin & Werner, 2009). This situation is usually associated with people living under certain conditions of a changing environment, especially those who live in other countries temporarily. Therefore, Iranian adolescents living in other countries temporarily, have been experiencing stress due to changes in family, socio-economic status, unfamiliar location and other factors, which can lead to high levels of stress (Jafari, Baharlou, & Mathias, 2010). The situation is the same with Iranian adolescents living in other countries as identified by Zangeneh, Nouroozifar and Kantini (2004) who found that Iranian adolescents are prone to developing psychosocial stress due to challenges such as language barriers, cultural and ethnic differences, and different school environments (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Thus, adolescents are identified as full of confusion and stress because the adolescence stage is a period of extreme changes experienced coincidentally, involving physical maturation, feelings for independence, enhancement of social salience, the interactions with peers, and the development of the brain (Casey et al., 2010). This is why the adolescence stage becomes a stressful time for many youth and can potentially lead to serious disorders (Hoffmann, Cerbone, & Su, 2000; Howard & Medway, 2004).

Therefore, stress can be defined as an over or under excitement experienced by an individual which subsequently results in mental or physiological pressure (Aldwin & Werner, 2009). To individuals, a situation is viewed as stressful they consider it an issue and if they sense that is a threatening or exceeds their internal or external capacity to cope. However, stress can be perceived in two different kinds, namely; chronic and constant stress (Contrada & Baum, 2010; Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar, & Heim, 2009). These two stressors can affect the whole performance or action of an individual causing divided attention and reduced concentration, poor decision making, and disturbs memory practice and recovery of information from memory (LeBlanc, 2009). There are other negative outcomes of stress among adolescents such as drugs and alcohol abuse or more serious effects such as depression and attempts at suicide (Byrne, Davenport, & Mazanov, 2007; Tay & Tam, 2010). Also, stress is a risk factor among adolescents (Preece, 2011), and this makes it necessary to consider stress as an important factor among Iranian adolescents in Malaysia.

In order to address the issue of stress among adolescents, some factors need to be taken into consideration. According to Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) and Yeh and Inose (2003) social support serves as an effective coping resource for people experiencing stressful life situations, which is common to adolescents when they are faced with a need to adjust to a new and unknown culture while being away from their support networks and their close-knit families. Kef and Deković (2004) explained the importance of social support to adolescents due to the many changes occurring within and outside of them. During this particular stage of life, these adolescents have a strong need to fit in, to belong and to be accepted without wanting to be special or different. Previous studies (Cohen & Koenig, 2003; Jou & Fukada, 1997; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Yeh & Inose, 2003) have shown social support to have a positive relation with the way secondary students adjust and negatively decrease acculturative stress, anxiety, and depression. Besides, coping strategies are a mechanism through which stress can be managed, as mentioned by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who posit that, learning new coping strategies can make an individual develop new skills to manage and reduce the level of stress.

In light of the above-mentioned arguments, the researcher endeavored to investigate how social support and stress are related among Iranian adolescents in Malaysia. As noted by Bhugra and Gupta (2011), living in another country influences individuals' mental health and causes stress especially among adolescents. Also, the researcher sought to examine if mediation using coping strategies had any impact on the way social support, and stress were related. Under stressful conditions, coping strategies not only involve managing stress, but they also consist of managing the negative emotional reactions that occur due to the consequences of stress (Compas et al., 2001).

Method

Participants and procedure

One hundred and fifty students of adolescent age studying in three Iranian schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia were selected to participate in this study. Their ages ranged from 12 to 18 years and they were subdivided into subgroups of early, middle and late adolescents ($n=150$, male= 36.7%, female= 63.3%, $M= 14.3$, $SD= 1.82$ years). The sampling of the participants was carried out using the cluster random sampling method.

Measure

Social support was assessed with the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (Kerres Malecki & Kilpatrick Demary, 2002), the Adolescent Stress Questionnaire (a revised version of the one by Byrne et al., 2007) and the Brief COPE Inventory assessed the various ways that people reacted to stress. In the Brief COPE Inventory, five scales (of four items each) measure conceptually distinct aspects of problem-focused coping strategies, while five scales measure emotion-focused coping strategies. Data collection was done in the classroom setting with the consent of the teachers and the respondents were assured that their answers to the questionnaires would be kept confidential, and so they were encouraged to respond honestly to the questionnaires.

Results

The mediation analyses were run in two models, which included the relationship of social support and stress with the mediation effect of problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies. The Sobel mediation test was conducted to determine if the mediation of the problem-focused coping strategies had any effect on the relationship between social support and stress and the effect was found to be insignificant. Therefore, social support insignificantly affects stress through problem-focused coping strategies ($z = 0.57$, $p > 0.05$). The Sobel mediation test was performed to study the mediation effect of emotion-focused coping strategies on the relationship between social support and stress and the effect was found to be significant. Therefore, social support significantly affects stress through emotion-focused coping strategies ($z= 2.29$, $p < 0.05$).

Regression analysis indicated that problem-focused coping strategies mediated the way social support relates to stress. It was found that social support significantly ($b= -0.42$,

SE = 0.04, $t = -9.51$, $p < 0.05$) affected stress (c' path). . However, social support's direct effect on problem-focused coping strategies (a path) was found to be not significant ($b = 0.03$, SE = 0.04, $t = 0.86$, $p > 0.05$). Similarly, the relationship between problem-focused coping strategies (MV) and stress (outcome) (b path) was also not significant ($b = -0.06$, SE = 0.85, $t = -0.77$, $p > 0.05$).

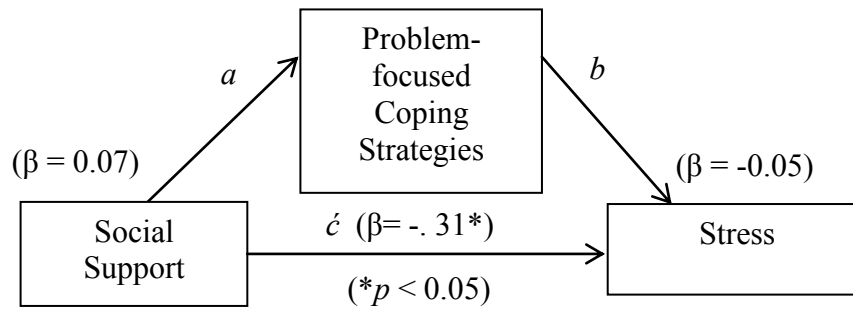


Figure 1. Mediating Effect of Problem-focused Coping Strategies on the Relationship between Social Support and Stress

Regression analysis showed that emotion-focused coping strategies have a mediation effect on how social support and stress were related. Social support's direct effect of on stress (c' path) was significant ($b = -0.38$, SE = 0.04, $t = -8.59$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, the direct effect of social support on emotion-focused coping strategies (a path) was also significant ($b = 0.13$, SE = 0.04, $t = 3.35$, $p < 0.05$). Finally, the relationship between emotion-focused coping strategies (MV) and stress (outcome) (b path) was again found to be significant ($b = -0.27$, SE = 0.08, $t = -3.15$, $p < 0.05$).

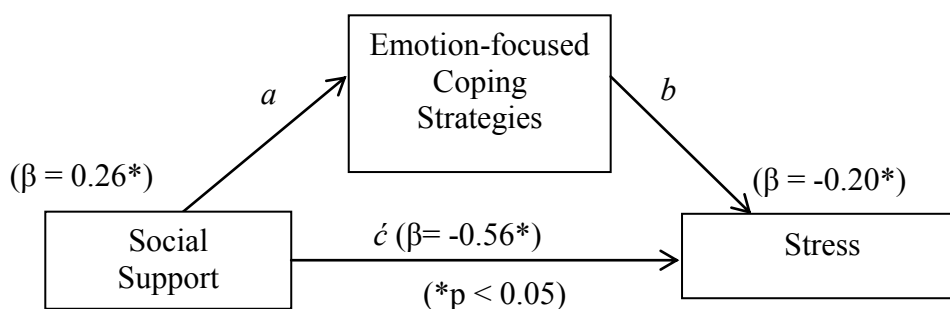


Figure 2. Mediating Effect of Emotion-focused Coping Strategies on the Relationship between Social Support and Stress

Discussion

According to previous studies, those adolescents with high social support had low levels of stress and those who believed that social support was not so forthcoming had high levels of stress (Baqtayan, 2011; Petroff, 2008). The findings of this study are in line with those of Petroff (2008) that indicated adolescents who had adequate social support had lower distress ratings than adolescents who felt that social support was not so forthcoming. Also, this is in line with Baqtayan (2011) who conducted an experimental study and discussed the effectiveness of social support on managing academic stress among adolescents.

Additionally, the result of this study is consistent with some previous studies that found higher levels of perceived social support were related to more problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping strategies (i.e., instrumental strategies) and less avoidant-type strategies (Bal et al., 2003; Crockett et al., 2007; Kerr, Albertson, Mathes, & Sarason, 1987; Khabaz et al., 2012; Rundell, 2002). Likewise, in the findings of McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar (2002) stress was associated with using fewer coping strategies and they showed sharper declines in life satisfaction and more stress. Although there is a relationship between social support and stress and also between problem-focused coping strategies, emotion-focused coping strategies and stress, but, there is no mediation effect of problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies on the relationship between social support and stress. So, one of the contributions of this study is the finding that problem-focused coping strategies do not have a mediation effect on how social support and stress are related as this has not been investigated in previous researches. Also, another contribution of this study is the revelation that the emotion-focused coping strategies can have a mediating effect on how social support and stress are related, an aspect that has been ignored in other studies.

Besides the general inverse relationship between social support and stress, using emotion-focused coping strategies serves to strengthen the effect of social support on stress. In particular, with the increase in stress, students who use emotion-focused coping strategies tend to have less stress. This suggests that emotion-focused coping strategies are effective strategies to help in decreasing stress among adolescents. This is consistent with the findings of Hampel and Petermann (2006), who showed emotion-focused coping strategies as one of the coping strategies that can decrease stress; the current study supports the notion that the use of emotion-focused coping strategies may be correlated with low level of stress among Iranian

adolescents and can have a mediating effect on the relationship between social support and stress.

References

- Achenbach, T. M. (1991). *Manual for the Youth Self-Report and 1991 Profile*. United States of America: Department of Psychiatry, University of Vermont Burlington.
- Al-Gelban, K. S., Al-Amri, H. S., & Mostafa, O. A. (2009). Prevalence of Depression, Anxiety and Stress as Measured by the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (Dass-42) among Secondary School Girls in Abha, Saudi Arabia. *Sultan Qaboos University Medical Journal*, 9(2), 140.
- Aldwin, C. M., & Werner, E. E. (2009). *Stress, Coping, and Development: An Integrative Perspective*. United States of America: The Guilford Press.
- Ayers, T. S., Sandier, I. N., West, S. G., & Roosa, M. W. (1996). A Dispositional and Situational Assessment of Children's Coping: Testing Alternative Models of Coping. *Journal of Personality*, 64(4), 923-958.
- Bal, S., Crombez, G., Oost, P. V., & Debourdeaudhuij, I. (2003). The Role of Social Support in Well-Being and Coping with Self-Reported Stressful Events in Adolescents. *Child Abuse & Neglect*.
- Baqutayan, S. (2011). Stress and Social Support. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 33(1), 29.
- Bhugra, D., & Gupta, S. (2010). *Migration and Mental Health*: Cambridge University Press.
- Briere, J., Johnson, K., Bissada, A., Damon, L., Crouch, J., et al. (2001). The Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children (Tscyc): Reliability and Association with Abuse Exposure in a Multi-Site Study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25(8), 1001-1014.
- Byrne, D., Davenport, S., & Mazanov, J. (2007). Profiles of Adolescent Stress: The Development of the Adolescent Stress Questionnaire (Asq). *Journal of adolescence*, 30(3), 393-416.
- Casey, B., Jones, R. M., Levita, L., Libby, V., Pattwell, S. S., et al. (2010). The Storm and Stress of Adolescence: Insights from Human Imaging and Mouse Genetics. *Developmental Psychobiology*, 52(3), 225-235.

- Cohen, & Koenig, H. G. (2003). Religion, Religiosity and Spirituality in the Biopsychosocial Model of Health and Ageing. *Ageing International*, 28(3), 215-241.
- Cohen, & McKay, G. (1984). Social Support, Stress, and the Buffering Hypothesis: A Theoretical Analysis. *Handbook of Psychology and Health*, 4, 253-267.
- Compas, B. E., Connor-Smith, J. K., Saltzman, H., Thomsen, A. H., & Wadsworth, M. E. (2001). Coping with Stress During Childhood and Adolescence: Problems, Progress, and Potential in Theory and Research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(1), 87.
- Connor, K. M., & Davidson, J. R. T. (2003). Development of a New Resilience Scale: The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Cd-Risc). *Depression and Anxiety*, 18(2), 76-82.
- Contrada, & Baum. (2010). *The Handbook of Stress Science: Biology, Psychology, and Health*: Springer Publishing Company.
- Crockett, L. J., Iturbide, M. I., Torres Stone, R. A., McGinley, M., Raffaelli, M., & Carlo, G. (2007). Acculturative Stress, Social Support, and Coping: Relations to Psychological Adjustment among Mexican American College Students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 13(4), 347.
- Davis, E. R. (2012). *The Effect of Parental Attachment and Level of Perceived Stress on College Adjustment in First Year College Students*. Alliant International University, California.
- Endler, N. S., & Parker, J. D. (1990). Multidimensional Assessment of Coping: A Critical Evaluation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(5), 844.
- Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Gruen, R. J., & DeLongis, A. (1986). Appraisal, Coping, Health Status, and Psychological Symptoms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50(3), 571.
- Galaif, E. R., Sussman, S., Chou, C. P., & Wills, T. A. (2003). Longitudinal Relations among Depression, Stress, and Coping in High Risk Youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32(4), 243-258.
- Govaerts, S., & Grégoire, J. (2004). Stressful Academic Situations: Study on Appraisal Variables in Adolescence. *Revue Européenne de Psychologie Appliquée/European Review of Applied Psychology*, 54(4), 261-271.

- Hampel, P., & Petermann, F. (2006). Perceived Stress, Coping, and Adjustment in Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 38*(4), 409-415.
- Hoffmann, J. P., Cerbone, F. G., & Su, S. S. (2000). A Growth Curve Analysis of Stress and Adolescent Drug Use. *Substance Use & Misuse, 35*(5), 687-716.
- Howard, M. S., & Medway, F. J. (2004). Adolescents' Attachment and Coping with Stress. *Psychology in the Schools, 41*(3), 391-402.
- Jou, Y. H., & Fukada, H. (1997). Stress and Social Support in Mental and Physical Health of Chinese Students in Japan. *Psychological Reports, 81*(3f), 1303-1312.
- Kef, S., & Deković, M. (2004). The Role of Parental and Peer Support in Adolescents Well-Being: A Comparison of Adolescents with and without a Visual Impairment. *Journal of Adolescence, 27*(4), 453-466.
- Kerr, K., Albertson, L., Mathes, P., & Sarason, B. (1987). *Psychological Characteristics of Reentry and Traditional University Women*.
- Kerres Malecki, C., & Kilpatrick Demary, M. (2002). Measuring Perceived Social Support: Development of the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (Casss). *Psychology in the Schools, 39*(1), 1-18.
- Khabaz, M., Behjati, Z., & Naseri, M. (2012). Relationship between Social Support and Coping Styles and Resiliency in Adolescents. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.
- Kim, J., Suh, W., Kim, S., & Gopalan, H. (2012). Coping Strategies to Manage Acculturative Stress: Meaningful Activity Participation, Social Support, and Positive Emotion among Korean Immigrant Adolescents in the USA. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 7*.
- Kreppner, K., & Lerner, R. M. (2013). *Family Systems and Life-Span Development*: Psychology Press.
- Lazarus, & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*: Springer Publishing Company.
- Leavy, R. L. (1983). Social Support and Psychological Disorder: A Review. *Journal of Community Psychology; Journal of Community Psychology*.
- LeBlanc, V. R. (2009). The Effects of Acute Stress on Performance: Implications for Health Professions Education. *Academic Medicine, 84*(10), S25.

- Lupien, S. J., McEwen, B. S., Gunnar, M. R., & Heim, C. (2009). Effects of Stress Throughout the Lifespan on the Brain, Behaviour and Cognition. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 10*(6), 434-445.
- Mallinckrodt, B., & Leong, F. T. (1992). International Graduate Students, Stress, and Social Support. *Journal of College Student Development.*
- McKnight, D. H., Choudhury, V., & Kacmar, C. (2002). Developing and Validating Trust Measures for E-Commerce: An Integrative Typology. *Information Systems Research, 13*(3), 334-359.
- Morris, E. A., Brooks, P. R., & May, J. L. (2003). The Relationship between Achievement Goal Orientation and Coping Style: Traditional Vs. Nontraditional College Students. *College Student Journal, 37*(1), 3-8.
- Orozco, V. (2007). *Ethnic Identity, Percieved Social Support, Coping Strategies, University Environment, Cultural Congruity, and Resilience of Latina/O College Students Dissertation.* The Ohio State University, United States of America.
- Park, C. L., & Adler, N. E. (2003). Coping Style as a Predictor of Health and Well-Being across the First Year of Medical School. *Health Psychology, 22*(6), 627.
- Petroff, L. L. (2008). Stress, Adult Attachment, and Academic Success among Community College Students.
- Piper, L. J. (2006). *Stressors, Social Support, and Stress Reactions: A Meta-Analysis.* University of North Texas.
- Preece, K. K. (2011). *Relations among Classroom Support, Academic Self-Efficacy, and Perceived Stress During Early Adolescence.* University of South Florida.
- Rahmandoust, M., Ahmadian, S., & Shah, I. M. (2011). Iranian Entrepreneurs in Malaysia: Reasons for Their Migration. *World Applied Sciences Journal, 13*(9), 2075-2081.
- Rajapaksa, S., & Dundes, L. (2002). It's a Long Way Home: International Student Adjustment to Living in the United States. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice, 4*(1), 15-28.
- Richards, R., McGee, R., Williams, S. M., Welch, D., & Hancox, R. J. (2010). Adolescent Screen Time and Attachment to Parents and Peers. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 164*(3), 258.

- Roberts, R. E., Attkisson, C. C., & Rosenblatt, A. (1998). Prevalence of Psychopathology among Children and Adolescents. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 155*(6), 715-725.
- Rundell, L. J. (2002). By Leslie Jane Rundell.
- Russell, D., Cutrona, C. E., Rose, J., & Yurko, K. (1984). Social and Emotional Loneliness: An Examination of Weiss's Typology of Loneliness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46*(6), 1313.
- Saffari, M., Ghofranipour, F., Mahmoudi, M., & Montazeri, A. (2011). Stress, Coping Strategies and Related Factors in a Sample of Iranian Adolescents. *Iranian Red Crescent Medical Journal, 13*(9), 641.
- Sahoo, S., & Khess, C. R. J. (2010). Prevalence of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress among Young Male Adults in India: A Dimensional and Categorical Diagnoses-Based Study. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 198*(12), 901.
- Sarason, Sarason, B. R., Shearin, E. N., & Pierce, G. R. (1987). A Brief Measure of Social Support: Practical and Theoretical Implications. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 4*(4), 497-510.
- Sellers, R. M., Caldwell, C. H., Schmeelk-Cone, K. H., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2003). Racial Identity, Racial Discrimination, Perceived Stress, and Psychological Distress among African American Young Adults. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 302-317*.
- Strohmeier, D., & Spiel, C. (2012). Peer Relations among Immigrant Adolescents: Methodological Challenges and Key Findings. *Migrations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, 57-65*.
- Suldo, S. M., Shaunessy, E., & Hardesty, R. (2008). Relationships among Stress, Coping, and Mental Health in High-Achieving High School Students. *Psychology in the Schools, 45*(4), 273-290.
- Taragar, S. (2009). *Stressors among the Students of High School*. University of Agricultural Sciences.
- Tay, E. L., & Tam, C. L. (2010). The Relationship between Perceived Parenting Styles and Stress Levels among Malaysian Secondary School Students. *Sunway Academic Journal, 7*, 89-104.

- Tolan, P. H., Gorman-Smith, D., Henry, D., Chung, K., & Hunt, M. (2002). The Relation of Patterns of Coping of Inner-City Youth to Psychopathology Symptoms. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 12*(4), 423-449.
- Vaux, A., Phillips, J., Holly, L., Thomson, B., Williams, D., & Stewart, D. (1986). The Social Support Appraisals (Ss-a) Scale: Studies of Reliability and Validity. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 14*(2), 195-218.
- Yeh, C. J., & Inose, M. (2003). International Students' Reported English Fluency, Social Support Satisfaction, and Social Connectedness as Predictors of Acculturative Stress. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 16*(1), 15-28.
- Yusoff, M. S. B., Rahim, A. F. A., & Yaacob, M. J. (2010). Prevalence and Sources of Stress among Universiti Sains Malaysia Medical Students. *The Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences: MJMS, 17*(1), 30.
- Zangeneh, M., Nouroozifar, M., & Kantini, E. (2004). Acculturation Stress and Drug Use among Iranian Youth. *Shiraz E-Medical Journal, 5*(3).