

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

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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, $t = -0.77$, $p > 0.05$).

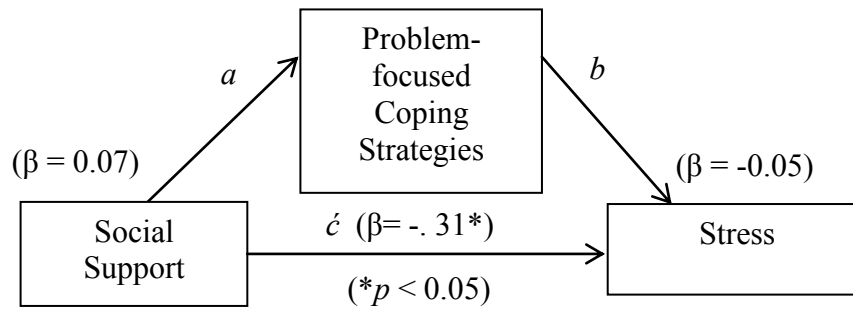


Figure 1. Mediating Effect of Problem-focused Coping Strategies on the Relationship between Social Support and Stress

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, $t = -3.15$, $p < 0.05$).

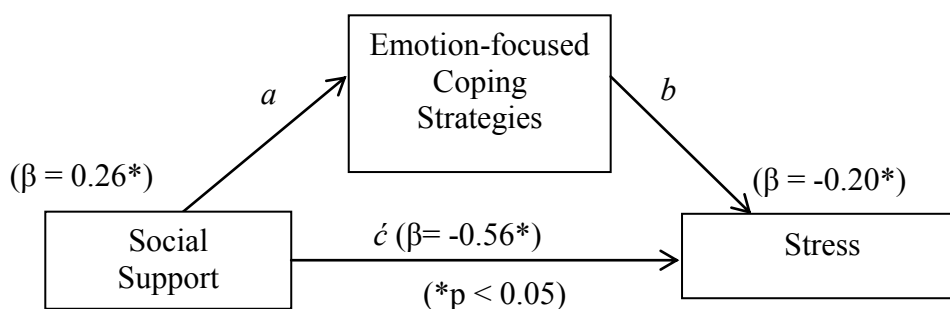


Figure 2. Mediating Effect of Emotion-focused Coping Strategies on the Relationship between Social Support and Stress

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.

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