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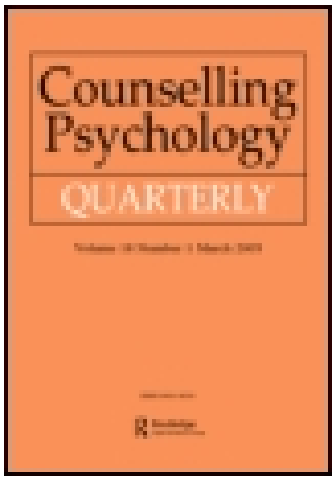

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Correlates of social support: Personal characteristics and social resources

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Correlates of social support: personal characteristics and social resources

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ABSTRACT *This study attempted to identify potential determinants of receiving support using multivariate analysis. A community probability sample of 581 adults were surveyed. In addition to recording demographic variables and social support receipt, extraversion and locus of control were measured as personal characteristics; being married and numbers of confidants were recorded as social resources indicators. We found that (1) gender, education, extraversion, locus of control and social resources had direct effects on social support receipt; (2) education also had an indirect effect through locus of control, whereas extraversion had indirect effects through both locus of control and social resources. Roles of personal characteristics and social resources in determining social support receipt were discussed.*

Introduction

The term social support has been widely used to refer to the mechanisms by which interpersonal relationships presumably protect people from the deleterious effects of stress (Cohen & McKay, 1984). In the past decade, there has been a great deal of interest in this construct: hundreds of studies have appeared in the literature, as well as numerous review articles (e.g. Cohen & Wills, 1985; Schonfeld, 1991; Swindle Jr., Cronkite & Moos, 1989) and books (Gottlieb, 1981; Cohen & Syme, 1985; Sarason, Sarason & Pierce, 1990).

To date, the majority of studies have focused on the consequences of receiving social support (Wortman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1987). Researchers have shown considerably less interest in identifying the causes or determinants of social support transactions. However, as House (1981) has emphasized, information about the determinants of social support may be critical in developing effective interventions to enhance the quality of support. Of course there are many different factors that may determine whether special support will be available, offered, received, or utilized effectively. These include characteristics of the recipient and the provider,

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and environmental or cultural factors that may influence both parties. This study focused on the recipient's personal characteristics and social resources.

The concept of control as a generalized belief on the part of an individual about the extent to which important outcomes are determined by internal factors such as ability and personal initiative, as opposed to fate, powerful others and similar external factors, derived originally from the work of Rotter (1966), and has subsequently been refined by other researchers (e.g. Levenson, 1974; Paulhus, 1983). This dimension of individual difference, usually designated 'locus of control' is perhaps the most extensively researched moderator in the stress-distress relationship (Cohen & Edwards, 1989). Research has generally suggested that internal locus of control was related to better psychological adjustment (Lu, 1990), and more adoption of active coping strategies in the face of adversity (Parkes, 1984). Recently, control as an important component in the 'Hardiness' construct, has also been investigated in relation to social support (Blaney & Ganellen, 1990). People with internal locus of control will presumably be more willing to seek support and consequently receive more, as help seeking represents a form of active coping, and the benefit of received social support may explain the health differential of people with internal vs external locus of control. Therefore, we hypothesized that internal locus of control may function as an antecedent of receiving social support.

Extraversion is a stable personality trait among others in most major personality models (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975; Costa & McCrae, 1992). It is characterized by a high level of sociability, assertiveness, ability to empathize with others, positive attitudes towards others, and competent social skills. These personal qualities may be directly relevant to successful support transaction. In fact, one previous study (Lu & Argyle, 1992) found correlations between extraversion and receiving support. Therefore, we hypothesized that extraversion may be another important personality dimension as a potential support determinant.

Of course, support receipt will no doubt be influenced by one's social resources. In fact, some researchers actually define social support operationally in terms of possessed social resources, such as being married, having a confidant relationship, or having a large number of friends (e.g. Brown & Harris, 1978; Berkman & Syme, 1979; Schoenbach, Kaplan, Fredman & Kleinbaum, 1986). Previous research has usually measured social resources in terms of social integration as opposed to social network, however, the latter was found to be weakly related to availability of social support (Seeman & Berkman, 1988). Therefore, in this study we used two social network indicators to measure social resources, i.e. being married and number of confidants. The aim was to clarify exactly how much social resources actually contribute to support receipt, both directly and indirectly through other mediators.

To sum, in this study we aimed to investigate personal characteristics and social resources as determinants of receiving support, while controlling for several important demographic variables, such as gender, age and education. Personal characteristics included locus of control and extraversion; social resources included being married and numbers of confidants. However, since the study design was cross-sectional due to various practical restrictions, the data could not be interpreted as causal, rather as relational.

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Method

Sample

Through the use of multi-stage systematic probability random sampling procedure, 600 adults aged over 20 living in Kaohsiung city, Taiwan, were sampled for this study. According to the published national census data, the final sample of 581 subjects are fairly representative of the city's population in terms of major demographic variables, such as gender, age distribution, and education attainment. Characteristics of the final sample will be described later in the results section.

Measurements

Demographic variables included age, gender and education attainment were recorded.

Social support was measured by a 15-item Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviour (Barrera, 1981), which included all forms of social support, e.g. emotional support, tangible support, information support and companionship. Subjects indicated frequency of receiving each supportive behaviour on 0–3 scales. A higher score indicates more received social support. This measure is intended to assess actual recent use of social support, may be in response to stress, rather than perceived support or support availability.

Control was measured by the Control Personality Inventory (Paulhus, 1983). The adapted version has 15 items on 7-point Likert scales covering both personal efficacy and interpersonal control. A higher total score indicates a higher level of internal locus of control.

Extraversion was measured by the E scale in the EPQ (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975).

Social resources measures collected data on marital status and numbers of confidants.

Procedure

All questionnaires had been translated, back-translated, pre-tested, and modified in previous studies using Chinese subjects (e.g. Lu, 1993, 1994). They had demonstrated reasonably acceptable reliability and validity.

All interviewers were recruited from senior psychology students. They were debriefed, and trained to conduct face-to-face interviews. Interviewers were instructed to recruit another respondent in the same street, should a particular subject on the original interview lists had declined to take part. However, exact reject rate could not be computed due to lack of records. All interviews were completed at respondents' homes, during July–September, 1993.

Results

T tests or Chi square statistics were conducted to compare males and females on

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age, education, locus of control, extraversion, social resources and support receipt. Since no significant gender difference was found on these variables, the entire sample was used in all the subsequent analyses.

Descriptive analyses were then conducted to illustrate the sample demographic characteristics. There were 327 males (56.4%) and 253 females (43.6%) in the sample; 26.4% of whom were between 20–29 years, 23.6% between 30–39, 19.9% between 40–49, 10.3% between 50–59, and 19.8% above 60. More than two-thirds were married. Most subjects (76.4%) had received up to 12 years of formal education.

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed among all variables studied, with gender and marital status treated as two dummy variables (females coded as '1' and males as '2'; married people coded '1' and not-currently-married as '0'). Results are shown in Table 1.

All three controlling demographic variables were correlated with received social support: younger, better educated people, and women received more social support. One measure of social resources (number of confidants) and personality traits correlated with received support: people with more confidants, people who were more extraverted and more internally controlled received more support. In addition, we noticed that some of the predictors were interrelated.

To explore the possible relations of selected psychosocial variables and social support receipt, a series of multiple regressions were conducted to build a path-type model. To gain parsimony in model building analyses, marital status as a measure of social resources was excluded from analyses, due to lack of correlation between being married and support receipt.

In our path analysis, age, gender and education were specified as exogenous variables. Extraversion was treated as a fourth exogenous variable, since it is assumed to be quite stable from early on (Eysenck, 1953). Number of confidants as a measure of social resources was treated as an endogenous variable, as it is reasonable to assume that certain personality characteristics (e.g. extraversion) and personal competence (e.g. social skills) may well influence one's pool of social resources. Perceived control as measured by locus of control was also treated as an endogenous variable, since the underlying construct of mastery or self-efficacy can be seen as results of social learning processes, proposed in Rotter's (1966) original conception. Finally, support receipt was a criterion variable. The path model estimated by these regressions is shown in Fig. 1.

The social support receipt was explained in a path model by a chain of regressions. In conventional path analysis, direct effects are the standardized regression coefficients (standardized path coefficients) obtained from ordinary least square regression; indirect effects are obtained by a summation of multiplying successive path coefficients when two variables are separated by intervening variables. Direct and indirect effects are added to obtain total effects (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

As we can see from Fig. 1, gender, locus of control and social resources each had only direct effects on support receipt (0.14, 0.10 and 0.09 respectively).

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TABLE 1. Pearson correlations between all variables

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Mean	SD
(1) Age	0.08	0.19**	−0.43***	0.00	−0.23***	−0.18**	−0.17**	42.38	16.36
(2) Gender		0.3	0.07	0.03	−0.01	−0.03	−0.13**	—	—
(3) Marital status			−0.14**	0.00	−0.08	0.07	−0.06	—	—
(4) Education				0.08	0.18**	0.30***	0.20***	10.79	4.30
(5) No. confidants					0.23***	0.15**	0.15**	3.61	5.28
(6) Extraversion						0.39***	0.25***	12.42	4.71
(7) Locus of control							0.24***	74.35	13.19
(8) Support receipt								19.30	8.46

Notes: Gender: '1' = females; '2' = males. Marital status: '1' = married; '0' = not-currently-married.
*$p < 0.05$ **$p < 0.01$ ***$p < 0.001$

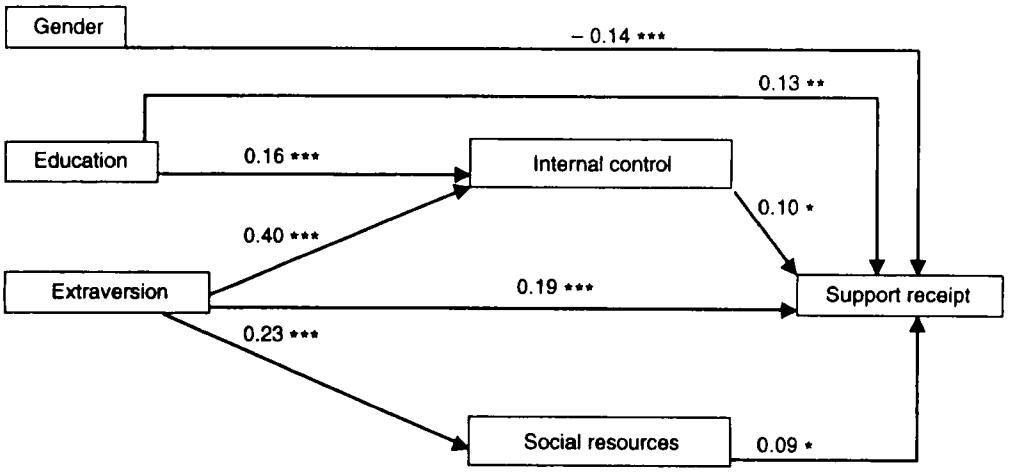

FIG. 1. A path model of support receipt.

Education had a direct effect (0.13) and an indirect effect through locus of control (0.16 *0.10 = 0.02), making its total effect of 0.15 (0.13 + 0.02) on support receipt. Similarly, extraversion had a direct effect (0.19), and two paths of indirect effects, one through locus of control (0.40 *0.10 = 0.04), and the other through social resources (0.23 *0.09 = 0.02), making its total effect of 0.25 (0.19 + 0.04 + 0.02) on support receipt.

Therefore, social support receipt was best predicted by extraversion and education, each showing both substantial direct and indirect effects. In addition, gender, locus of control, and social resources were also significant in their direct link to support receipt. However, age showed neither direct nor indirect effects on support receipt.

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to predict receiving support from a cluster of demographic variables, personal and social resources measures. In the domain of personal characteristics, both extraversion and locus of control were found to correlate with receiving support in univariate analysis, whereas extraversion had both direct and indirect effects, locus of control had a direct effect in multivariate analysis. Among the two measures of social resources, being married was not a correlate of support receipt, whereas numbers of confidants were positively correlated with receiving support in univariate analysis, and also demonstrated a direct effect in multivariate analysis. In addition, gender and education were found to correlate with receiving support in univariate analysis, whereas the former showed a direct effect, and the latter showed both direct and indirect effects in multivariate analysis.

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As so often is the case in social and behavioural sciences research, some potential predictors were interrelated, such as extraversion and measures of social resources. Most previous research has used correlation or simple regression analysis, which has failed to take into account of these complicated interrelations. Instead, more sophisticated statistical strategies should be used to untangle these relationships, hence, to facilitate theoretical progress in social support research. One strength of this study is therefore, the use of exploratory path analysis to reveal significant potential determinants of social support, and to distinguish direct effects from indirect effects.

A second strength of this study was the use of a community probability adult sample. Comparing to previously studied young college students, senior citizens, or various clinical samples, this sampling procedure ensured fairly good representativeness, hence, enhanced generalizability and interpretability of results.

We will now discuss the implications of personal characteristics, social resources, and demographic variables as potential determinants of support receipt.

In this study gender was found directly related to receiving support: men received less social support than women. This interpretation is partially consistent with one previous finding that women receive more social support possibly because they actively seek more support from a variety of relationships (Lu & Argyle, 1992). Folkman *et al.* (1986) has also found that women favour 'seeking social support' as a form of coping in time of stress.

Somewhat surprisingly, education also demonstrated a direct effect on support receipt: better educated people tended to receive more social support. One possible explanation is that better educated people are intellectually more aware of, and more sensitive to support transaction, hence, tend to inflate support receipt reports. However, this interpretation is unlikely, because the support measure used in this study consists only concrete behavioural deeds, which allows little room for personal interpretation.

A second possible explanation is that better educated people tend to have more access to various information and services, are more able to cope with crises in terms of financial resources and personal ability. Most importantly, they also have an integrated, active social network with members who are equally well-equipped to help. This may account for the direct link between education and receiving support. Sociologists McLeod & Kessler (1990) adopted a similar mechanism to explain social class differentials in health: social class and education are closely related.

A third possible explanation, of course, takes account of locus of control as an intervening variable. Better educated people seem to have a stronger sense of internal control, which in turn, is related to support receipt. It is conceivable that formal education emphasizing independence and personal mastery should have a positive impact on a construct of self-efficacy, which underlies Paulhus' measure of locus of control. Furthermore, consistent with findings in a previous study (Lu, 1993), internal locus of control significantly predicted more support receipt.

Consistent with our hypothesis, extraversion came out as an important predictor of receiving support. It seems that extraverts not only have a strong tendency to actively seek support, but also have a stronger sense of internal control, and more

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access to social resources. Although extraversion was only moderately correlated with locus of control and the social resources indicator, it may, nonetheless enhance and transform these potential personal and social resources into actual support. The key element here may be the relationship skills extroverts possessed. Therefore, future research may need to decompose 'extraversion' to gain more information about the support transaction.

Conclusion

Gender and education were quite important in support receipt. Extraversion as a personality trait, or a behavioural orientation was very important in determining support receipt. It had not only direct effects, but also acted as a transformational agent for locus of control and social resources.

However, one limitation in this study should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design actually does not allow causal interpretation of the results. However, extraversion as a personality characteristic and gender, education as a state of affair can be regarded as fairly *a priori* factors, therefore, the causal interpretation as proposed in this study should not be regarded as a serious methodological weakness.

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