

Students' Perceived Stress and Social Support

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Background and Purpose

Previous research has found that high levels of social support lead to lower levels of depression and anxiety (Dahlem, Farley, Zimet, & Zimet, 1988), making social support crucial for the development and adjustment of a successful and healthy college life. Social support has also been positively correlated with lower levels of overall stress in college students (Brissette, Carver, & Scheier, 2002). . . In a study where the effects of divorce were noted among young adults on social support and satisfaction, it was found that good relationships with their parents led to more satisfying and higher levels of social support (Riggio, 2004). Also younger people reported a higher need for social support from friends and family (Heiman, & Kariv, 2004). . . The present research seeks to study in depth the relationship between perceived stress, not only academic but non-academic, and social support (total social support, social support from family, social support from non-family, and satisfaction), in college students. Additionally, it seeks to study how these two factors vary between classification, gender, and students who come from divorced parents or parents who are still together.

Hypothesis #1: Three measures of perceived stress (academic, non-academic, and combined) will be positively correlated with poor social support (amount of social support, and satisfaction).

Hypothesis #2 : The relationship between; the three different measures of perceived stress, and four different measures of social support, will be different across the participants' genders, classifications, and parental status.

Method

Design

The design consisted of a quasi-experimental, correlational study, with two sets of dependent variables; perceived stress, and social support. Perceived stress was defined in three measurements; academic stress, non-academic stress, and combined stress. Social support was defined in four measurements; total social support, family social support, non-family social support, and satisfaction.

Participants

86 participants for this study were recruited at Stephen F. Austin State University. The age range was 18-40, and the age median was 21. There were 72 female and 14 male participants. Students varied in classification; 21 freshmen, 18 sophomores, 27 juniors, and 20 seniors/graduate. There were 31 participants whose parents were divorced and 55 participants whose parents were still together.

Materials

The study consisted of one questionnaire composed of three portions. The first portion was the informed consent form. The second portion of the questionnaire consisted of a demographic data and perceived stress questionnaire. This questionnaire asked the participant to provide personal information such as age, gender, classification, organizations currently involved in, parental status, etc. In addition, three questions regarding academic stress, non-academic, and combined stress were also included in order to assess perceived stress. Students answered the questions on a five-point Likert scale, from "feel no stress" (1) to "feel extreme stress" (5). The third portion of the questionnaire was the Social Support Questionnaire (Short Form) developed by Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, and Pierce (1987). A 12-item questionnaire which asked six questions where participants could provide up to 9 initials and their relationships to them. Six additional questions meant to assess satisfaction with the provided support. They scored their satisfaction on a Likert scale, the scale ranged from "very satisfied" (6) to "very dissatisfied" (1).

Results

Table 1 illustrates the multiple regression results performed among all four social support measures. All correlations showed a significant (<.01) positive correlation except between social support derived from family and non-family.

Table 2 illustrates the overall, bivariate correlation regressions for all 12 possible correlations between the seven measurements (four social support, three perceived stress), that were performed separately for each gender, school classification, and parental status (divorced or together).

The correlation between total social support and perceived non-academic stress showed a significant positive correlation among the overall sample, both genders alike, and participants whose parents are still together.

Social support from family and non-academic stress showed to be a positive significant correlation especially among females and participants whose parents were still together. The overall sample and freshmen, showed a near significant correlation between support from family and non-academic stress. Social support from family and perceived combined stress also provided a significant correlation for females and showed near significance for the overall sample, freshmen and sophomores. The correlation between social support satisfaction and combined stress showed a positive significant Relationship among the overall sample, seniors, and males. It provided a near significant correlation for sophomores as well. In addition, seniors showed a significant positive correlation between total social support and academic stress. Males showed a significant positive correlation between non-academic stress and social support from non-family and satisfaction. And lastly, participants whose parents were still together demonstrated a correlation between social support satisfaction and non-academic stress.

Table 1

Bivariate Correlations Performed Among All Four Measures of Social Support.

Social Support Measures	Social Support from Family	Social Support from Non-Family	Social Support Satisfaction
Total Social Support	.649**	.850**	.446**
Social Support from Family	--	.152	.315**
Social Support from Non-Family	--	--	.361**

Notes: Correlations marked with an asterisk (*) were significant at p<.05. Correlations marked with two asterisks (**) were significant at p<.01.

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Performed Among Classification, Gender, and Parental Status Using Three Measures of Stress and Four Measures of Social Support.

	Overall	Freshmen	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	Male	Female	Divorced	Together
Total Social Support and Academic Stress	-.013	-.061	-.120	-.217	.497*	.315	-.063	.117	-.084
Total Social Support and Non-Academic Stress	-.241*	-.370	-.283	-.133	-.273	-.614*	-.265*	-.116	-.316*
Total Social Support and Combined Stress	-.161	-.319	-.391	-.114	.185	-.021	-.217	-.052	-.226
Family Social Support and Academic Stress	.031	-.095	-.270	-.113	.346	.585	-.036	.141	-.011
Family Social Support and Non-Academic Stress	-.214 *	-.450 *	-.413	-.094	-.074	-.092	-.282*	-.041	-.332*
Family Social Support and Combined Stress	-.213 *	-.431 *	-.484 *	-.137	.130	.087	-.283*	-.126	-.265
Non-Family Social Support and Academic Stress	-.039	-.138	-.037	-.280	.344	-.040	-.056	.040	-.086
Non-Family Social Support and Non-Academic Stress	-.165	-.087	-.177	-.150	-.262	-.688*	-.148	-.133	-.195
Non-Family Social Support and Combined Stress	-.062	-.043	-.280	-.077	.127	-.090	-.086	.043	-.122
Social Support Satisfaction and Academic Stress	-.030	-.259	-.039	.080	.050	-.079	-.046	-.071	-.025
Social Support Satisfaction and Non-Academic Stress	-.160	.066	.088	-.309	-.403	-.763*	-.052	.008	-.336*
Social Support Satisfaction and Combined Stress	-.283*	-.041	-.470 *	-.203	-.506*	-.738*	-.212	-.326	-.259

Notes: Correlations marked with an asterisk (*) were significant at p<.05. Correlations marked with two asterisks (**) were significant at p<.01. Also Correlations marked with a circle (°) were near significant at p<.07.

Discussion

Only two significant correlations were found between all measures of stress and social support for the overall sample. Differences between genders, classifications and parental status produced some interesting results. Both women and men suffer from low social support when encountered with high non-academic stress and vice versa. Yet results indicated that women seek more support from family when encountered with non-academic stress and combined stress. Results also showed that men rely more on their peers, by showing a high correlation between non-family support and non-academic stress. Results pointed that freshmen also rely more on family than non-family for social support. Sophomores also showed to have a near significant correlation between family support and combined stress. Juniors did not provide any significant or near significant correlations. Yet, the most intriguing finding showed that seniors had a significant negative correlation between total social support and academic stress. While their social support was high, their academic stress was high as well. They also showed a significant positive correlation between satisfaction and combined stress. These findings point that, even though seniors may be getting high levels of social support, it does not ease their academic stress, or increase their satisfaction with their social support. A plausible explanation for this phenomena is that the same support may be the cause of stress. Further research should explore this phenomena in depth. Students whose parents were still together showed a significant positive correlation between combined stress and total social support, satisfaction, and support from family. Students from divorced households did not offer any significant correlations. These findings support the belief that students from intact families have a better relationship between stress and social support from family.