

The Role of Perceived Social Support in Adolescents with Academic Stress

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The purpose of the paper is to study the relationship between perceived social support and academic stress among adolescents. The study has been conducted on a sample of 280 adolescents. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and Bisht Battery of stress scale were used to measure perceived social support and academic stress respectively. The findings suggest that adolescents, who were high on perceived social support, were low on all sub-dimensions of academic stress, which determine that perceived social support enhances an individual's psychological and social functioning. Consistent positive support contributes to improve an individual's ability to break down stress into a manageable level. The paper stresses upon importance and role of perceived social support in reduction of academic stress among young adults.

Keywords: Adolescents, Perceived Social Support, Academic Stress

Teenagers have the tendency to become non conformist in response to a variety of growing up anxieties, frustration and pressures faced by them in day to day life. However, stress induced anxieties, frustration, pressures and fears adversely affect children's performances at various levels. Adolescent period is one of the continual change and transition between individuals and their contexts. When biological, psychological, cognitive, and social changes of adolescence occur simultaneously, the risk of problems occurring in youth's development is greater (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). At the same time, the increase in academic demands and the complexity of the school structure make the task of academic success for adolescents even more difficult. Because parent involvement has been shown to be a very important positive force in a child's life (Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding & Walberg, 2005), one would expect that during such a critical and demanding phase the two most important environments in child development, home and school, would increase their

collaboration. The opposite though is true: As children progress through school, parent involvement declines dramatically (Zill & Nord, 1994). When there is imbalance between the environmental demand and the response of the individual, academic stress occurs (Dhingra 2005).

Academic stress is a mental stress with respect to some anticipated frustration associated with academic failure or even an awareness of possibility of such failure (Gupta & Khan 1987). It comprises a number of demands reportedly: course requirements; time management issues; financial burdens; interactions with faculty; personal goals; social activities; adjustment to the campus environment; and lack of support networks (Kariv & Heiman, 2005; Misra, 2000; Von Ah, Ebert, Ngamvitroj, Park, & Hang, 2004). Four domains of academic stress are: Academic Frustration, Academic Pressure, Academic Conflict, and Academic Anxiety (Bisht, 1987).

Academic pressure compounded pressure of getting all students to attain minimum proficiency on assignments and

tests. The growing cognitive skills of adolescents widen their horizon while at the same time they become more aware of the realities of their future choices. Academic pressures become more intense derived from a need for perfection. At school, pressure is felt over grades and strict deadlines to complete the assignments, and at home the parental pressure, to obtain good marks, to compete with one's own self or to make career choices, is mounting up day by day. Sometimes it is the pressure from peers when friends in groups continuously compare marks and discuss the extent of revisions done. Academic frustration is likely to occur in academic situations where efforts are not meeting with success and where progress is stymied. It is a state of being frustrated or thoroughly upset by one or multiple things either directly or indirectly related to school, classes, homework, or other academic aspects. Academic frustration may result in dropping out, feeling of fear, powerlessness and hopelessness.

Academic anxiety is a unifying representation for various forms of specialized manifestations of anxiety in school settings. It is often caused by unrealistic thought patterns that follow from concern about the possibility of an unacceptably poor performance on an academic task. It is the concern one feels about the overall picture of academic evaluation including test taking, test preparation, assignment completion and so forth. These thoughts interfere not only with a student's ability to learn content but detrimentally impact basic motivation and engagement in education because academically anxious students feel as though they have no control over what is happening. Academic conflict may originate from a number of sources including differences in information, beliefs, values, interests or desires in academic setting. When students differ with their parents and teachers in terms of i) Conflict of aims- different goals, ii) Conflict of ideas- different interpretation; iii) Conflict

of attitudes - different opinions, and iv) Conflict of behavior- different behaviors are unacceptable, academic conflict arises. Conflicts between home and school may occur over how children have been taught to view the world, the qualities of interpersonal relationships, standards of behaviour, and the goals and objectives of education.

During adolescence, the feeling of belonging is quite significant (Yesilyaprak, 2005) and a significantly increased amount of time is spent outside of the family with friends, which, in turn, is an important step for socialization. Those who trust their families and have strong relationships with them have been observed to maintain good relationships with their peers as well (Aydın, 2005). For adolescents to solve problems concerning their peers and family, adapt to their environment, and keep themselves psychologically well, social support is important (Altunbas, 2002). Social support is often deemed a buffer against the negative effects of stress, including stress in an academic context (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008). In general, studies show that early adolescents who perceive their parents, peers and/or teachers as supportive fare better in school than those who do not perceive their socializers as such (e.g., Goodenow, 1993; Levitt, Guacci, & Levitt, 1994; Wentzel 1998).

Perceived social support refers to a person's perception of readily available support from friends, family, and others. Perceived support is undoubtedly more than cognition, as the Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce (1990) "sense of acceptance" definition suggests. It is the range of significant interpersonal relationships, which includes social networks of colleagues, friends, and family; enhance an individual's psychological and social functioning. Consistent, positive support contributes to the likelihood that an individual will take action following a stressful situation or conflict. This support will improve an individual's ability to

break down stress into a manageable level (Licitra-Kleckler, & Waas, 1993). During adolescence, parents make up the source of support for personality merits and important decision making (Wall, Covell, & Macintyre, 1999); teachers play an important role in sanity, academic attitude, and academic success (Gurkan, 1993); but peers are the most sought after sources of help and support. The mutual sharing of personal, social, or moral ideas by peers supports the individual and his/her social development (Turner, 1999). More enduring support schemas, and more spontaneous support statements, are interwoven with positive emotions such as contentment and warmth, happiness and joy, as opposed to negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and anger.

The key research questions which guided the present study were: To what extent do high school students perceive academic stress? What is their level of overall social support? What is their level of support among family members, friends and significant others? Based on the existing literature, the study verified the following hypotheses:

1) Adolescents high on Perceived Social Support would exhibit less academic frustration as compared to those who are low on Perceived Social Support.

2) Adolescents high on Perceived Social Support would be significantly low on academic conflict as compared to those having low perceived social support.

3) Academic Pressure among adolescents having high Perceived Social Support would be low as compared to adolescents low on Perceived Social Support.

4) Adolescents with high Perceived Social Support would be significantly exhibit less academic anxiety than adolescents with low Perceived Social Support.

5) Adolescents high on perceived social support would be low at academic stress as

compared to those having low perceived social support.

Method

Participants:

Participants were 280 English-speaking high school students, 140(50%) were girls and 140(50%) were boys with a mean age of 16.5 years.

Tools:

Bisht Battery of Academic Stress Scale (Bisht, 1987): It consists of 80 items. It has four components-academic anxiety, academic frustration, academic pressure, and academic conflict. Academic anxiety 15 items, academic frustration has 26 items, academic pressure has 24 items, academic conflict has 15 items.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS- Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, Farley, 1988): It is a 12-item scale that measures perceived support from three domains: family, friends, and a significant others. It is based on Likert's seven-point scale ranging from "very strongly disagree" to "very strongly agree". Total and subscale scores range from 1 to 7, with higher scores suggesting greater levels of perceived social support.

Results

F (MANOVA) was also calculated to see the overall difference between high perceived social support and low perceived social support group on different domains of academic stress. As evident in the table 1, results revealed that individuals having high social support scored significantly lower on all dimensions of academic stress than individuals having low high social support ($F=200.82^{**}$, $p < .01$). Individuals who were high on Perceived Social Support (PSS) scored significantly less ($M=18.56$) as compared to those with low Perceived Social Support ($M=45.94$) on academic frustration. The difference between both the groups has been found to be highly significant

Table I: Means, Standard Deviations and F-ratios of High Perceived Social Support and Low Perceived Social Support group on Subscales of Academic Stress.

	High Perceived Social Support Group		Low Perceived Social Support Group		F (ANOVA)	F (MANOVA)
	M	SD	M	SD		
Academic Frustration	18.56	3.19	45.94	7.12	172.79**	
Academic Pressure	16.26	3.22	43.40	6.01	221.39**	200.82**
Academic Conflict	13.81	2.44	42.57	3.91	543.09**	
Academic Anxiety	13.50	2.83	41.80	4.77	363.41**	

**p < 0.01)

($f=172.79^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). The results support the first hypothesis that adolescents high on Perceived Social Support will be low at academic frustration sub dimension of academic stress. For adolescents, an identity crisis, the perils of peer interaction, acceptance and rejection of situations, persons and ideas and academic pressures are a constant source of teen stress and teenage frustration. As social support acts as a buffer in stressful situations, therefore, it is known that adolescents with high social support perception have fewer feelings of loneliness and frustration. It can also be observed that individuals with high perceived social support scored significantly less ($M=16.26$) on academic pressure as compared to those having low perceived social support ($M=43.40$). The difference between both the groups has been found significant ($f=221.39^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). It proves the second hypothesis too that adolescents high on perceived social support would exhibit less academic pressure sub dimension of academic stress. Stress is produced when pressure exceeds one's perceived ability to cope. Social support softens the frequency as well as quantity of academic stress.

Table 1 also showed that academic conflict was significantly less in individuals who were high on perceived social support ($M=13.81$) as compared to those with low perceived social support ($M=42.57$). The difference between both the groups has been found significant ($f=543^{**}.09$ $p<0.01$). The

third hypothesis has been proved that adolescents high on perceived social support would have low scores at academic pressure sub dimension of academic stress. This may be because the advice and encouragement from sources of support increases the likelihood that an individual will rely on active problem solving and conflict resolution strategies. These techniques assist students in dealing with various stressors in the environment and facilitate a positive adjustment process. Academic Anxiety found to be statistical significant between individuals who had high ($M=13.50$) and low perceived social support ($M= 41.80$). The difference between both the groups has been found significant ($f=363^{**}.41$, $P < 0.01$) proving the fourth hypothesis that teenagers high on perceived social support would be low at academic anxiety sub dimension of academic stress. If social support cannot eliminate stressors totally, it can at least help people, to feel more optimistic, more capable of control, less anxious, and more willing to try new ways of coping with stressors.

Table 2 shows that mean scores of high perceived social support group on academic stress are lower than low perceived social support group mean scores. Both the groups showed significant difference on academic stress ($t = 77.72$, $p < .01$). Though it was not hypothesized to see gender differences among adolescents in terms of their perceptions towards their sources of social support and academic stress, but the data was analyzed in this direction too.

Table 2. Mean, SD and t-ratio of High Perceived Social Support and Low Perceived Social Support group on Academic Stress (Total).

	High Perceived Social Support Group		Low Perceived Social Support Group		t-ratio
	M	SD	M	SD	
Academic Stress (Total)	62.07	5.92	173.64	15.92	77.72**

Table 3. Mean, SD and t-ratios showing Gender Differences between Perceived Social Support and Academic Stress (Total)

	Boys		Girls		t-ratio
	M	SD	M	SD	
Perceived Social Support	53.74	9.80	54.38	9.17	0.56
Academic Stress (Total)	120.08	59.34	116.58	56.08	0.51

Table 3 clearly indicates the non-significant differences between boys and girls on the perception of social support ($t=0.56$, $p<.05$) among adolescents. No gender difference was found on academic stress ($t=0.51$, $p=.05$) within this sample of high school students. Consistent with recent research (Ting et al., 2006), the current sample of high school students reported that perceived social support does have strong impact on academic stress. The current study examined the magnitude of available family and friends support and their potential effect on academic stress and revealed a substantial amount of students' academic stress among adolescents with low perceived social support. The results suggest that the higher adolescent's perceived social support, the lesser is her or his academic stress. Thus, it can be said that regardless of the level of stress in the adolescent's life, social support sources positively affect the individual's adaptation in a positive way (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Feeling socially supported appears to help students in at-risk situations develop academic resilience, achieve positive educational outcomes, and establish a buffer against stress (Clark, 1991). The students who reported a fair amount of social support from all sources of support systems were found to be very low on all the domains of academic stress. This may be because they have a caring group of people to turn to cope

best with stress and situations in their lives. If these young minds get right environment at home, school and within the peer groups in a particular time frame of teenage, it can enhance their ability to fight with day to day stressors and help them in at-risk situations. Perceived social support does help in creating an atmosphere of capability in coping with studies, social life, or whatever changes that happened to students in a particular time frame.

The present findings are also in line with the previous contemporary researches which indicate that an individual's academic success (Yıldırım & Ergene, 2003), problem-solving abilities (Budak, 1999; Unuvar, 2003), social accomplishment level (Altunbas, 2002), decision-making abilities (Gucray, 1998), life satisfaction level (Duru, 2007), and self-esteem (Esenay, 2002; Kahriman, 2002; Unuvar, 2003) are positively affected by an increased social support system. The results revealed that the students' perceived support (from parents, peers and teacher) facilitated their motivational beliefs and emotions, which, in turn, reduced their academic stress. The unique contribution of social support to the overall effect is consistent with that of Wentzel (1998) who found that parental support indirectly influenced early adolescents' achievement through its effect on school and class related interest. The findings are consistent with the notion that supportive

relationships with significant others reduces anxiety and enhances enjoyment which in turn are associated with adaptive outcomes (Baumeister & Leary 1995); the perception of teacher support reduces feelings of anxiety and insecurity (Trickett & Moos 1974) and enhances feelings of enjoyment (Fraser & Fisher 1982). But present study fail to support the existing literature regarding gender differences in social support and academic stress in contrast to prior research that has demonstrated women's higher levels of perceived social support from friends and significant others (Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000; Zimet et al., 1988),

This piece of research provides useful implications for parents, counsellors and educators. As it is evident that lack of perceived social support is a vulnerable factor in stress, it is vital that parents emphasize family support for their children and frequently discuss problems encountered by school-going children. Schools should also provide services in order to tackle their stressors by improving students' coping capability. The presence of trained counsellors would be an added advantage as their services would not only be restricted to providing professional assistance relating to academic problems but also as an alternative avenue to cope with their personal feelings, frustrations and high expectations from various sources which can be too much to handle on their own.

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