

CONSIDERING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF
LIFE STRESS

by

Pearl Joanna Winckler

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements of the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Leaving the family home to attend university may be one of the rites of passage into adulthood, and independence for many high school graduates, yet the journey that ensues may be one of self-discovery, excitement, and delectation. Indeed, the college experience is as much about preparing for life event stressors mentally and emotionally as it is about intellectual attainment. The purpose of this study was to determine whether college student's reported social support is correlated with perceived life stress. The Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire USQ, which is an 83-item checklist was used to measure perceived life stress. Many students may wrestle with life stress, even with strong supportive networks in place. As such, participants were also be asked to complete the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support MSPSS, which is a 12-item measure of social support. This descriptive, correlational study recruited a sample population of 225 students from a University in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. It was hypothesized that there would be a correlation between reported social support and perceived stress (i.e. as a student reports more social support, he or she will in turn report less perceived stress), which was found to be true. Implications of this study include the potential benefit of support networks among this population to decrease overall perceived stress.

Keywords: undergraduates, college, university, social support, perceived stress

Dedication

I dedicate and complete this dissertation with full recognition, thanks, and praise to my Heavenly Father for His omnipotence, grace, mercy, and love – through whom I harnessed my determination and love for research and learning.

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband and sons, who witnessed, and laughed at me falling asleep - laptop in tow, during tireless days and nights, pushing through on this journey. I love you all deeply. Thanks for your support and loving me unconditionally.

I dedicate this dissertation to my darling Mother – Pearl J. Goodridge (who, amongst many other life lessons too lengthy to write here – taught me that (i) anything is possible because of God; (ii) not to give up; and (iii) to always be thorough.

And, finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my earthly Father – Rev. Martin H. Goodridge. Dad ~ you instilled the value of education to my siblings and I, as we were growing up. Thank you (and Mum) for every sacrifice made – as you led by example, and always wanted only the best for each of us – beginning with a personal relationship with Christ, overflowing into a love for family, music, academic achievement, and the successfully pursuit of individual goals (values now extended to your grandchildren also). Thank you for always encouraging me, even when the running family joke was, ‘What is she doing now, again?’. When I shared imminent plans to proceed with doctoral studies, and recently updated you on successfully stages along the way, there you were again, spurring me on with messages such as, ‘Congratulations! Keep at it!’. I kept at it, Dad – inspired by an inherited passion for knowledge and reading from you.

With gratitude, and all the love in my heart, today I say, ‘Dad – This one is for You!’.

Acknowledgements

“Not that I have already...arrived at my goal...But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind...I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” paraphrased from Philippians 3:12-16 (New International Version).

The essence of this dissertation study is an exploration of the value and impact of social support from family, friends, and significant others. I am abundantly fortunate to have had rich support from all three of these sources during my studies, and to this end, I would like to extend sincerest appreciation to the following persons, beginning with significant others:

My Alpha and Omega – Heavenly Father, without You, I am nothing. Thank you for continuing to be my ever-present help in time of trouble, and my ray of sunshine in times of joy.

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Friends – who at various junctures, extended much-needed encouragement and support, without even knowing it, by understanding when I was occupied, unavailable, and/or consumed with writing. I extend sincerest thanks to Donna Tull-Cox (thank you for staying in touch and always asking, “How’s everything going?”); Gail Phillips (my mentor; your insight and knowledge are beyond this time, thank you for sharing some of your intellect with me; Alison Applewhite (my dear friend, prayer warrior and one of the brightest minds I know ~ thank you for keeping me amused); Nicole Wright (a silent, yet relentless, advocate for academic

excellence and advancement beyond ~ thank you for being you); Allison Archer & my god-son Li Li; ~ you officially have me back now; thank you for your patience, understanding and support).

Family – I am truly blessed and grateful for the unwavering love and support of my siblings, and extended family circle, during this dissertation season, including: the Jackman's, the Goodridge's x3, the West's, the Winckler's, and the Cadle's. Thank you all for cheering me on and believing in me. I am indebted to you all. Special mention must be made of two family members I appointed as sounding boards during this process, particularly when I was fine-tuning my topic. They committed to being there as my initial readers and were available - even when I was not. Angela West (love you, Sis! Thank you for always being there; Sasha Goodridge (Snash, love you loads! Thank you for your insightful comments and suggestions, they were greatly appreciated).

To my husband, Richard, and our sons Joshua, Reece, Acen and Romeo ~ giving all honor to God ~ We did it, Guys!!! This milestone was even more significant because I have you in my life. Know your dreams, commit to fulfilling them (it's never too late :), and enjoy the inner refining process along the way! I love you all...

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List of Abbreviations

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Support (MSPSS)

Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire (USQ)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In much the same way as fledgling birds grow to a stage of near readiness to fly and test their wings (Yoda, Shiozaki, Shirai, Matsumoto & Yamamoto, 2016) such may bare uncanny resemblance of college and university students being escorted out of their home, with bags fully packed for the university experience. Many students may stay at home while navigating the origins of newfound independence (Pokorny, Holley & Kane, 2017; Hof, Messoussi, Schuijt, Goelji & Kunst, 2018) while others venture out alone, sturdily finding his or her own individual course elsewhere. While such a stage in life is bound to be coupled with stress, it has been said that having a strong social support system in place may be one of the best antidotes for circumventing stressful situations (Saul & Simon, 2016; Acri, Hooley, Richarson & Moaba, 2017; Delaney, 2017; Lee & Dik, 2017). This research sought to determine whether a relationship exists between reported social support and perceived stress among this population. Chapter one begins with a brief history and discussion of the study population and common stressors they may face. An overview of pertinent social support systems was reviewed, followed by a synopsis of the rationale and importance of this study.

Background

University Enrollment Statistics

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) (the U.S. Department of Education's statistical research and evaluation branch) functions to provide data on educational research, which includes statistically recording the overall college enrollment rates of young adults aged 18-24 years enrolled in a two or four year institution as either a undergraduate or graduate student (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). On April 25, 2019 the 'College Enrollment and

Work Activity of Recent High School and College Graduates Summary' reported that 3.2 million youth between the ages of 16 and 24 graduated from high school in 2018 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Of that group, 2.2 million, or 69.1 percent enrolled in college by October 2018, 18.6 percent were unemployed, and 12.3 percent joined the labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). While the Institute of Education Sciences also tracks other data within groups for college enrollment statistics, such as the college enrollment rates by gender, race and age (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), this study focused on the overall college enrollment rates of adults aged 18 and above.

Problem Statement

Stressful life events are an inevitable part of life; stress emanates from actions or occurrences in life, some of which can be controlled, and many which cannot (Rudland & Wilkinson, 2018). One of the main reasons stress is of concern to humankind is because of the way it can affect an individual, both mentally and physically (Araiza, Lobel & Marci, 2018). While stress can spur good results-, such as boosting motivation and heightening focus (Rudland & Wilkinson, 2018)-, for the purposes of this study, emphasis was placed on unhealthy stress events that are common to university students. The impetus of this study centers on prior research findings that discovered "a lack of social support has been identified as one of the determinants of stress amongst university students (Teoh & Rose, 2001; Jibeen, 2016, p.1004). Social support may impact a student's perceived stressors.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to determine whether there is a relationship between university students reported social support and perceived stressors.

Significance of the Study

The outcomes of this study were important because they signified a relationship exists between social support and perceived stress – by extension, it follows that strengthening and sustaining these social support networks may be crucial to curtailing stressors for university students, perhaps even beyond university.

Research Question

RQ1: Is there a correlation between student’s reported social support, as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and perceived life stressors, as measured by the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire?

Ho: There is no correlation between student’s reported social support and perceived life stressors.

Ha: There is a correlation between student’s reported social support and perceived life stressors.

Definitions

Perceived Social Support - will be defined as “the perceived social and psychological resources that an individual obtains from his or her environment” (Yildrum, 1997; Malkoc & Yalcin, 2015, p. 36).

Life Stressors - will be defined as any mental, emotional or physical factors that result in mental or bodily tension (Mahani & Panchal, 2019).

Summary

It has been clearly documented that the life of the university student is one in which “higher levels of stress” (Singh, Priya & Gayathri, 2019, p. 2408) are expected - in comparison to general populations not enrolled as students (Singh et al., 2019). Unhealthy stress may lead to

undesired physical and mental effects (Araiza, Lobel & Marci, 2018). As such, it is important to understand reported social support in university students and the potential relationship with perceived stressors. An appropriate response may lie in strengthening overall social support systems as a means of circumventing some stressors for this population.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two outlines the existing literature surrounding the topic of this study. After describing the composition of the focus demographic for this study – the university population – a brief overview of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs will be shared. Through a discussion of related literature, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs third identified need, love and belongingness, will be highlighted, along with an integration and synthesis of literature related to social support and perceived life stressors in student populations. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs: specifically, belongingness is the theoretical framework undergirding this study.

Literature Strategy

In order to be as exhaustive and current as possible, and determine what a basic search of the words social support would yield - a full text, peer reviewed, advanced search of the ProQuest Central database entering the words ‘social support’ in the first line of entry, and ‘students’ in the second entry yielded 254,779 results between 1885 and April, 2020. Apparent research by Coffey (1983), the oldest article generated, only appeared to reference ‘social’ in its title. Other than this, research related to social support was lacking (Coffey, 1893). A new refined, advanced search, of the ProQuest Central database using the words ‘Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support MSPSS’ were entered in the first field, and ‘university student’ was entered in the second field. This time, in addition to full text, peer reviewed selections, the researcher also filtered (a) the source type to only include books, conferences papers and proceedings, government and official publications, reports, and scholarly journals; (b) the document type to only include articles, books, case studies and conference proceedings; and (c) the language type to only include English documents. This time, 459 results populated, with

the oldest study using the MSPSS to determine well-being in young adults (Chou, 1999). A further search using the words ‘Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire USQ’ and ‘university student’ was conducted and yielded 28 results, suggesting a need for further research in this area. Further variations of ProQuest Central searches, Ebsco access through Liberty University library, and the Google Scholar search engine were also used to search and compile literature sources for this study.

Gap in Literature. In researching for this study, no other studies were found that considered whether university students’ perceived life stress was likely to increase or decrease in relation to the student’s reported support. This represents a gap in literature that could lead to further exploration. Since an association was established between perceived stressors and reported social support, it is hoped that greater efforts will be made to strengthen and broaden existing support in this specific population. Strengthening and broadening existing social supports may mean these individuals perceive less stressors and/or are better able to cope with stress.

Composition of University Population

While the Immediate College Enrollment Rate reported a seven percent increase in immediate college enrollment attendance by high school students as of April 2020 (National Center for Education, 2020), the most current verification of undergraduate enrollment appears to be recorded under total fall enrollment for 2018, as per 2018 Table 306.50 in the Digest of Education Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). With projected enrollment of more than five million students in private universities in 2018, and that figure predicted to increase to 5.3 million by 2028 - the overall rates of college enrollment for young adults continues to rise (Duffin, 2019). These statistics appear to have been generated from Table

303.10 in the Digest of Education Statistics and include total Fall enrollment and projections in post-secondary, degree-granting institutions between 1947 through 2028 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). These projections appear to fall in line with predictions made by the United States government, under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). In 2018, the United States Department of Labor projected a 51.7 percent decline in the labor force in the 16 to 24 age group “due to increased time spent in school and displaced opportunities” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019, p. 2). Simply stated, university attendance of young adults is expected to continue increasing over the next ten years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Duffin, 2019; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

Some of the factors attributed to a rise in university attendance include an increase in the availability of student loans (Lucca, Nadauld & Shen, 2019), changes in the economy (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019), and changes in the workforce (Institute of Education Sciences, 2019). Expected annual growth in employment is expected to generate in excess of 4.6 million jobs by 2028, with the fastest growing sectors being construction, health care and social assistance, and private educational services (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). This means there is a demand for more university-trained specialists to fill the gaps. The above-named factors combined appear to justify and substantiate rising university enrollment rates.

Many students entering university life experience multiple stressors; some of these may include job-related pressures to secure employment (McCarthy, Trace, O’Donovan, O’Regan, Brady-Nevin, O’Shea, Martin & Murphy, 2010); expectations to appease family hopes (Boni, Paiva, Oliveira, Lucchetti, Fregnani & Paiva, 2018); financial stress resulting from incurred student debt (Tran, Mintert, Llamas & Lam, 2018); and having to negotiate loan repayment terms (Robb, 2017). These stressors exist all the while trying to fulfill personal goals to pursue

happiness (Low, Overall, Hammond & Girme, 2017). The irony here is that individuals may encounter an overlap or compounding of stressors as they prepare for life post-graduation – before they even graduate! An example of this would be a student sourcing, interviewing, and securing an internship position or job in their chosen career field (Barbarash, 2016; Renganathan, Zainal & Chong, 2012).

Theoretical Framework: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – An Overview

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs highlights belongingness as the third hierarchical needs requirement, after the first hierarchy of physiological needs, and the second hierarchy of safety and shelter needs (Oved, 2017). According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, physiological needs must be met first, for without food, water and shelter, it is impossible for the human body to survive. While the longest a person can survive without food is approximately eight weeks, the longest a person's bodily functions can operate without water is just under a week (Chattopadhyay, 2009). The length of time a person can live without shelter varies according to their geographical location, i.e. depending on whether he or she lives in a warm climate or a cold climate, but ultimately the human body requires a shelter from external elements and weather exposure (Streimikiene, 2014). Some researchers would argue that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs mirror the basic needs and stages of a newborn infant, as they mature into adulthood; with physiological needs being akin to a baby requiring warmth, food, water and rest (Oved, 2017). As the child embarks upon the need for safety and security, his or her coping and attachment skills for life are established (Silton, Flannelly, Flannelly & Galek, 2011). It seems the coping skills needed to navigate through life stressors are taught and reinforced during the formative years of development, into early adolescence, at a time when the social support from family of origin should be solidified (Chae, Goodman, Goodman, Troxel, McWilliams,

Thompson, Shaver & Widaman, 2018). It is beyond the purview of this study, but maladaptive practices are learned, enforced, and cemented in a child's formative years of development (Chae et al., 2018). Oftentimes when belongingness and love needs are not met during infancy, research suggests some individuals will go on to struggle with building friendships and having healthy intimate relationships with others, into adulthood (Chae et al., 2018).

Integrating Social Support with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – Love & Belongingness

It has been said that reported social support “is a basic need for sharing the problems of individual's in relation to their family and friends, for being in harmony with the environment and for spiritual health” (Konan, Durmus, Agiroglu Bakir, & Turkoglu, 2018, p. 245). Love and belongingness, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, resonates with the human need for relationship, association, connection, attachment and membership (Abulof, 2017). An aspect of belongingness that fuses with the concept of reported social supports lies in the innate human desire to be wanted and needed by others (Abulof, 2017). Social support reinforces wellbeing and reduces stressors (Malkoc & Yalcin, 2015). Belongingness, as a psychological need, suggests that there is a need for love from family, a need for intimate relationships with significant others, and a need for companionship from friends, (Silton et al., 2011). One study's focus on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggested that only as base needs are met, could subsequent needs then be pursued until, they are in turn met (D'Souza & Gurin, 2017). Nonetheless, the theory states that all hierarchal needs are of value and importance; the social support and belongingness needs for the presence of others is as much a need as food and water.

Reinforcing Key Concepts in Literature

The key concepts in this literature review are social support and life stressors. These will be examined further below.

Understanding Social Support Systems

Social support has been defined as “the perceived social and psychological resources that an individual obtains from his or her environment” (Yildrum, 1997; Malkoc & Yalcin, 2015, p. 36). One of the interesting dynamics of social support is that it is subjective (Cheng, 2017). Social support need not be factual or true, in order to be deemed supportive. This is because reported social support may be subjective based upon thought-processes, contextual values, and personal experiences. Within this scope of social support, two studies concluded that perceived social support may actually be more crucial than received support (Cheng, 2017; Nazari, Afshar, Sadeghmoghadam, Shabestari & Farhadi, 2020). For reported social support to potentially be of greater worth or value than actual support – appears to place huge onus upon subjective individual feelings in relationship to others. A social support network refers to persons most likely to provide help and assistance in time of need (Nazari et al., 2020). Social support can take the form of financial support, practical support, emotional support or informational support (Nazari et al., 2020). One research study suggested that social support may even be driven by cultural values and social norms (Lawley, Willett, Scollon & Lehman, 2019).

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support measurement tool (used in this study) categorizes social support in terms of family, friends, and significant others. Each of these examples of social support will be highlighted below. However, it is important to note that these are not all forms of social support, merely categorizations that attempt to capture an array of support possibilities. Social support encompasses perceived social and psychological resources not specific to any categories, but rather, subjectively experienced and defined by individuals (Yildrum, 1997; Malkoc & Yalcin, 2015).

Family as Defined in Literature

Family has been defined as persons related to individuals by blood or marriage (Garland, 2012). The family has undergone many transformations since biblical references to Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis: “But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs...Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man” Genesis 2:20a-22 (The New International Version). More families, today, now consist of couples without children and couples with children (Rhodes, Blanchard, Benoit, Levy-Milne, Jean Naylor, Symons Downs & Warburton, 2014; Carter & McGoldrick, 2016); same gender couples (Steinmetz & Fischer, 2019); single-parent families (Christensen & King, 2019); foster (Tankred, 2020) and adoption families (Seymore, 2019); blended families (Emdady, Hajebi, Mirzahoseini & Monirpour, 2019); and extended generational families including grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews, and in-laws (Lehti, Erola & Tanskanen, 2019). Even in instances when family members cease to communicate with each other, or when negative situations occur that break down relationships, individuals related by blood will always, definitively, still be family. In contrast, families connected by marriage may dissolve in the event of marriage terminations. There is much discourse on what constitutes a family, for example, a family ought to be an entity that protects its members from harmful persons or entities, that provides a safe living environment free of harm and danger, and which reinforces healthy social values and moral character (Zaharia, 2019). However, because there are individuals who were raised in dysfunctional home environments, many have adapted a stance that family is not comprised of name or bloodline, but rather by the depth and quality of evolved

relationships with others, who have proven their worth extolling such virtues as trust, loyalty, and reliability, which are sometimes lacking in the family of origin (Rizvi & Najam, 2019).

There are those who express that, based upon past negative interactions and reported toxic upbringings, family members become the persons an individual may choose and who they most connect with (Delker, Smith, Rosenthal, Bernstein & Freyd, 2018). A ‘newly’ selected substitute family may vary in association and include membership in groups such as gang member affiliation (Durairaja, Saat, & Kamaluddin, 2019), to identification with preferred sexual orientation groups (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018), to indoctrination into church membership (McCleary, 2018) and a host of other categories. A potential drawback of this study is that because the term ‘family’ leaves much leeway for subjective interpretation, some participants may respond to questions on reported social support from family, as identified on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, based upon relationships with family of origin members related by blood or marriage, while others may answer questions on reported social support from family in response to present relationships with their newly formed families.

Friend as Defined in Literature

A friend may be defined as a “voluntary by choice relationship of shared experiences...reciprocity, and some degree of emotional involvement...typically absent in acquaintanceship” (Bowlby, 2011, p. 608; Morrison et al., 2012; Weeks et al., 2001; Morgan, 2009; Hall, 2019). In numerous biblical texts, Christian scripture appears to make several correlations between friendships and family/brotherhood: “A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17) speaks about a ‘friend’ being a person who sticks closer than a brother; “Do not forsake your own friend or your father’s friend, and do not go to your brother’s house in the day of calamity; better is a neighbor who is near than a brother far

away” (Proverbs 27:10); “A man of too many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24); “Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1); “It is good not to eat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles” (Romans 14:21); “...in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love” (2 Peter 1:7); and “To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:8-9) - all above quoted scripture verses taken from The King James Version.

In much the same way, families can be functional or dysfunctional; friends can also have positive or negative influences on individuals (Handley, Russotti, Rogosch & Cicchetti, 2019). Depending on the circumstances, it is possible for a helpful friend to be considered a rejecting friend. For example, if a person has a friend who tries to stop them from abusing illegal substances and attempts to block them from indulging in substance abuse, this may be interpreted as the friend’s actions being unsupportive, obstructive and unhelpful by removing or making it difficult for a person to access a desired substance. As such, the determination as to whether a friend is supportive or unsupportive may also be subjective in nature, which is a potential limitation of this study.

Significant Others as Defined in Literature

The influence of a significant other may be positive or negative in nature, in much the same way family and friends may have constructive or destructive influences on individuals, as previously highlighted. One study described a person with ‘significant other’ status as someone who has a measure of influence over another person, in terms of that person’s perspective being

of some worth and/or value to the other (Forster, Druke, Britz, Gauggei & Main, 2019). While there are studies that define ‘significant other’ as a spouse or individual a person is romantically involved with (Williams, Wall & Fish, 2019; Zamani, Ziaie, Lakeh & Leili, 2019), research also reveals that ‘significant other’ relationships and connections may be platonic and nonsexual in nature; such as a spiritual relationship between a revered leader and a church member (Chatters, Nguyen, Taylor & Hope, 2018), an amicable relationship between an academic mentor and student (Nyadanu, Garglo, Adampah & Garglo, 2015), or a collaborative relationship between an employer and employee (Xesha, Iwu, Stabbert & Nduna, 2014). The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support identifies and incorporates the term ‘significant other’ as one of its three categories for measuring social support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1998) yet without explanation. Hence, with such broad understandings and applications of the term ‘significant other’, as referenced in just a few of the examples mentioned above, it appears any true definition of ‘significant other’ lies within subjective interpretation.

Summarizing Social Support

Social support may be considered a “buffer against life stressors as well as an agent promoting health and wellness” (Dollette et al., 2004; Jibeen, 2016, p. 1004). This appears to predicate the onslaught of stressors as so universal - that the need for social support systems is deemed crucial to wellbeing (Jibeen, 2016). Social support may be described as the seemingly professed, sensed, felt and understood level of provision, encouragement and assistance from others. As previously stated, not all reported social support is healthy and constructive; as in, some individuals may have been party to negative experiences from a result of negative social support interactions with others. Such may lead these individuals to report social support from others as a negative, and void of encouragement or assistance from their respective social

support networks. Both an abundance of social support, and an absence of social support are of interest in this study.

Acknowledging the Stress of University Students

The decision to attend university is usually taken as a path to future success for students. Along that path, however, there are potential stressors associated with being a student, adjusting to university life, and fulfilling academic requirements for completion. During this stage in life, individuals usually have their first taste of freedom (Russell & Arthur, 2016). While all individuals will not leave home, this study focused on individuals in this developmental stage that choose to leave their family of origin home to reside either on a university campus or close to a university.

Demographics embody the structure of student groups and are useful in helping researchers know how closely sample populations resemble total populations, in addition to investigating whether demographics are a factor in particular studies (Warner, 2012). Even though key demographic factors such as race e.g. when African-American and Caucasian students live in close proximity with each other for the first time (Jaggers & Iverson, 2012); sexual orientation e.g. when LGBTQ students experience more or less support for the first time (Boyland, Swensson, Ellis, Coleman & Boyland, 2016); nationality e.g. when international students assimilate into new cultures for the first time (Szabo, Ward & Jose, 2015; Bathke & Ryoka, 2016); and disability status e.g. when a student with autism navigates university life away from home for the first time (Ackles, Fields & Skinner, 2013) have been acknowledged as major stressors for the university student, this study is concerned with more universal stressors that are likely to impact a wider cross-section of students.

Several potential stressors students may encounter when they attend university include (i) geographically relocating to new surroundings (Allen-Collinson & Brown, 2012); (ii) transitioning to a change in previously accessed resources (Cole, Newman & Wheaton, 2017); and (iii) roommate conflicts (Bahns, Crandall, Canevello & Crocker, 2013).

The potential for stress due to a major life transition away from home – potential stressor number one – geographically relocating to new surroundings, appears to have been well researched. There are varying reasons why students may decide to geographically move miles away from home to pursue a college education (Wode, 2018). Some of those reasons include whether an individual's parents had an opportunity to attend university (Niu, 2015), whether an individual's home state had a master plan in place to meet future anticipated labor force needs by encouraging the pursuance of particular degree-related careers (McHenry & Flora, 2017), whether an individual's state offered merit aid programs designed to make in-state education more appealing in comparison to top-ranked institutions of greater repute (Sjoquist & Winters, 2016), and the cost factor involved in pursuing an in-state versus out-of-state education (Kelchen, 2019). Such are some of the reasons an individual may opt to geographically move to a new university location.

The potential for stress due to a shift in prior expectations – potential stressor number two – transitioning to a change in previously accessed resources (Brownson, Drum, Swanbrow Becker, Saathoff & Hentschel, 2016; Canto, Becker, Cox, Hayden & Osborn, (2017), also seems to be an adjustment that may be difficult. For some, the structural aesthetics of facilities may be more than what they had at home, while for others – the first order of the day may be to eat humble pies and realize just how much they took for granted at home (Brock, 2002; Pierson & Canto, 2012; Canto, Becker, Cox, Hayden & Osborn, (2017). Whether individuals happily, or

reservedly, wave goodbye to the comforts of home, and all things familiar, the change from what previously was – to what is, may be stressful for some students as they navigate change to designated new study facilities, a foreign bed, and different living amenities such as access to closet space, new bathroom rules, laundry planning, and incorporating mealtimes around available dining options.

The potential for stress due to a change in the living arrangement – potential stressor number three - the potential for roommate conflicts (Houston, First, Spialek, Sorensen, Mills-Sandoval, Lockett, First, Nitiema, Allen & Pfefferbaum, 2016) appears to be a fairly prevalent occurrence according to recent studies (Dumford, Ribera & Miller, 2019; Martin, Tobin & Spenner, 2014; Houston et al., 2016; Anuradha, Dutta, Raja, Sivaprakasam & Patil, 2017). Individuals may find themselves faced with changes in who they live with (Dumford, Ribera & Miller, 2019). For the individual who has a roommate, that person must then calculate whether they believe they can make a connection with their designated new living partner, or whether the mere thought of being within a confined area alone with the other person is likely not possible because their differences are just too extreme (Martin, Tobin & Spenner, 2014). The level of stress that can arise when roommates are incompatible or in conflict with one another may be equated to an unhealthy toxic living space, devoid of peace (Anuradha et al., 2017). In this stressful climate, problems such as loneliness (Henninger, Eshbaugh, Osbeck, & Madigan, 2016), sleep deprivation and anxiety (Fasoro, Oluwadare, Ojo, & Oni, 2019) can escalate quickly.

Geographical relocation (Allen-Collinson & Brown, 2012), transitioning from previously accessed resources (Cole, Newman & Wheaton, 2017), and roommate conflicts (Bahns, Crandall, Canevello & Crocker, 2013) are just three of many potentially stressful situations

applicable to the university student population. Hopefully, by briefly highlighting a few of many potential stressors for the university student, legitimacy for the plight of university students and potential life stressors is more readily apparent.

Understanding the Nature & Types of Stressors

Simply stated, stressors are events or situations that apply stress to individuals (Rudland & Wilkinson, 2018). The word 'stress' appears to have an array of definitions, one of which seems to center around the concept of uncertainty as the essence or root cause (Peters, McEwen & Friston, 2017), and there are various types of stress such as chronic stress and eustress (Mahani & Panchal, 2019). In one study, stress was characterized as "a force, not an outcome" (Rudland & Wilkinson, 2018, p. 692). Since stress has been defined as a "physical, mental, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension" (William, 2016; Mahani & Panchal, 2019, p. 5), for the purposes of this study, a 'life event stressor' will be defined as any mental, emotional or physical factor that results in mental or bodily tension (Mahani & Panchal, 2019).

Extensive research spanning decades has long acknowledged and documented some of the types of stressors that often beset individuals who attend university, which include psychological stressors, biological stressors and environmental stressors (Manzar, Salahuddin, Peter, Alghadir, Anser, Bahammam & Pandi-Perumal, 2019). Much of previous literature appeared to focus heavily on either the stress levels of students at university, as it pertains to the quality of life for these individuals, (Bhandari, 2012; Ribeiro, Pereira, Freire, De Oliveira, Casotti & Boery, 2018) or it seemed to focus heavily on the mental health of university students and whether various other factors impacted the psychological well-being of these individuals (Kulsoom, & Afsar, 2015; Rubin, 2014) in addition to reported social support. For the university student, potential stressors may include not having enough time to eat, having to make a class

presentation, breaking up or fighting with a boyfriend or girlfriend, trying to decide which major to choose, death of a friend or family member, doing poorly on a test, not finding a parking space, balancing work and school schedules, disagreeing with a close friend, and being unable to sleep (Crandall, Preisler & Aussprung, 1992). A full list of 83 potential stressors are listed in the Undergraduate Student Questionnaire, which participants were asked to complete.

Establishing a Connection: Social Support and Life Stressors

Social support for individuals may include having a special person one can call in times of need, with whom one can share highs and lows, validate feelings, and provide comfort (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1998). Social support may come from friends (Zimet et al., 1998), family (Zimet et al., 1998), and/or any system from which an individual experienced emotional validation and felt heard. One study likened social support to an “important protective factor for...students during their transition to university” (Tinajero, Martinez-Lopez, Guisande & Paramo, 2015, p. 221). This assertion is fundamental to the framework of this study, that centers on the importance of belongingness as determined by Maslow (Oved, 2017) and reported social support, in relation to a reduction of stressors for university students. Family support has been hailed as an important component and determinant of how well students cope and adjust to stressors associated with student life, (Arias de la Torre, Fernandez-Villa, Molina, Amezcua-Prieto, Mateos, Cancela, Delgado-Rodriguez, Ortiz-Moncada, Alguacil, Redondo, Gomez-Acebo, Morales-Suarez-Varela, Abellan, Mejias, Valero, Ayan, Vilorio-Marques, Olmedo-Requena & Martin, 2019). Economic support and emotional support are two of the most popular ways students are, or are not, supported socially by families, however a “[family] support system...could also constitute an added stress when support is poor” (Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf, & Wilens, 2015; Storrie, Ahern & Tuckett, 2010; Paramo Fernandez, Araujo, Tinajero,

Almeida & Rodriguez-Gonzalez, 2017; Arias de la Torre et al., 2019, p. 3). In these instances, a dysfunctional support system was found to be causally linked to stressors and distress in university students, with the converse being found to hold true – that functional support from family could be instrumental in helping individuals “develop their own healthy and adapted coping skills” (Arias de la Torre et al., 2019, p. 8).

The Impact of Perceived Social Support on Perceived Stressors for Students

The establishing of whether student reported social support would likely impact the perceived amount of life stress events faced was of focused interest. Stated differently, would the amount of social support students report have a negative or positive relationship (or any relationship at all) with perception of life stress events. It is hoped that social support has a positive impact on individuals (Leach, 2015) but it is also understood that social support can potentially have a negative or toxic impact on individuals also (Azimi & Daigle, 2020); such relationships were likely reflective in the results.

The first study to use the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) appeared interested in whether an association between subjective well-being and social support existed (Chou, 1999). The outcome of the study appeared to be that well-being was associated with positive relationships with friends and family. Relationship satisfaction with friends and family seemed to be a strong indication of perceived social support in this study (Chou, 1999). It must be noted that Chou used the Chinese version of the MSPSS (Chou, 1999), and no further details were given on this. Subsequent studies duplicated using the MSPSS as a possible influence on mental health, possibly because of the MSPSS’s good concurrent validity with depression (Corcoran & Fischer, 2013).

A plethora of research studies appear to have utilized the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support to measure reported social support in university students (Araiza & Lobel, 2018; Boni, Paiva, de Oliveira, Lucchetti, Fregnani & Paiva, 2018; Cheng Kuang-Tsan & Fu-Yuan, 2017; Chou, 1999; Civitci, 2015; Colak & Dogan, 2016; Coyle & Malecki, 2018; Delaney, 2017; Fasoro, Oluwadare, Ojo & Oni, 2019; Ginty & Singh, 2019; Henninger, Eshbaugh, Osbeck & Madigan, 2016; Jibeen, 2016; Jong-Sun, 2019; Kamp, West, Holmstrom, Luo, Wyatt & Given, 2019; Kim, Jee, Lee, An & Lee, 2018; Konan, Durmus, Agiroglu Bakir & Turkoglu, 2018; Lawley, Willett, Scollon & Lehman, 2019; Leach, 2015; Lee & Dik, 2017; Malinauskas & Malinauskiene, 2020; Malkoc & Yalcin, 2015; Perumal, 2019; Maymon, Hall & Harley, 2019; Mouza, 2015; Naseri, Mohamadi, Sayehmiri & Azizpoor, 2015; Popa-Velea, Diaconescu, Mihailescu, Popsecu & Macarie, 2017; Tinajero, Martinez-lopez, Rodriguez, Guisande & Paramo; 2015; Williams, Wall & Fish, 2019; Zamaï, Ziaie, Lakeh & Leili. 2019; Zhi-Hui, Qui, Fang-Qiong, Shi-Han & Wu, 2020). Social support in student populations has been studied in relation to stress, mental health and mindfulness (Anastasiades, Kapoor, Wootten & Lamis, 2017, stress and heart reactivity (Ginty & Conklin, 2011), stress and alcohol consumption (Mphele, Gralewski & Balogun, 2013), stress in relation to economic issues in Greece (Mouza, 2015), stress, coping and gender (Gefen & Fish, 2012), social support, satisfaction and spiritual well-being (Alorani & Alradaydeh, 2017); social support, internalized symptoms and pet ownership (Barker, Schubert, Barker, Kuo, Kendler & Dick, 2018); social support, depression and grief disorder (Al-Gamal, Saeed, Victor & Long, 2018); and social support and the burnout of students (Kim, Jee, Lee, An & Lee, 2018). Variations on these studies considered whether reported social support, life stress events and perceptions of stress were related to leisure and healthy behavior in the same population (Kim, Brown & Stephen,

2018), psychological distress, feeling connected and satisfaction with overall university experience (Pidgeon, Davies & Stapleton, 2017).

It is important for potential life event stressors to be reduced as much as possible, and whenever possible, because ongoing exposure to stressful situations or conditions may lead to a deterioration in mental health (Saeed, Saleem, Ashraf, Razzaq, Akhtar, Maryam, Abbas, Akhtar, Raima, Khan & Rasool, 2017). While mental health is beyond the scope of this study, it will only be mentioned, as it pertains to social supports and individual stressors. Stress has been found to negatively affect the lives of the university students (Coiro, Bettis & Compas, 2017).

Social Support and Perceived Stress Literature in the Past Twelve Months

A ProQuest Central search indicated that in the past twelve months (April 2019 to April 2020) in excess of 700 peer reviewed articles were written in scholarly journals pertaining to ‘perceived social support’ and ‘university student stressors’. An in-depth review of the first 100 populated studies resulted in a categorizing of the most current literature on social support and student stressors: (i) social support and non-student related stressors; (ii) social support, students and general stress-related themes; (iii) social support, perceived stress and miscellaneous student themes; and (iv) social support and student-related stressors.

Social Support and Non-Student Related Stressors

Upon examination, seventy-six percent of recent articles seemed to focus on social support and non-student related stressor topics such as social support and post-traumatic trauma in firefighters (Jong-Sun, 2019); social support and behavior management of adults with inflammatory bowel disease (Kamp, West, Holmstrom, Luo, Wyatt & Given, 2019); social support and body appreciation in bisexual, lesbian and queer women (Blair, Kwitowski, Trujillo, & Perrin, 2019); social organization support for petroleum workers with depression (Zhi-Hui,

Qui, Fang-Qiong, Shi-Han & Wu, 2020) and social support, suicide and self-injury links to autism (Moseley, Gregory, Smith, Allison & Baron-Cohen, 2020).

Social Support, Students and General Stress-Related Themes

Articles focusing on social support and general stress-related themes, specifically mental illness (Mboya, John, Kibopile, Mhando, George & Ngocho, 2020; Bedaso, Duko & Yeneabat, 2020; Cilar, Barr, Stiglic & Pajnkihar, 2019; Mitreva, Gjorgieva, Filiposki & Gjorshevski, 2019); and coping mechanisms (Konaszewski, Kolemba & Niesjobedzka, 2019; Tharaldsen, 2019) seemed to account for seven percent of articles during the past year. Peer support, or social support from friends, was deemed to be one way to alleviate mental distress in university students (Bedaso et al., 2020). Two studies considered mental health and well-being (not social support) in response to student stressors (Cilar et. al., 2019; Mitreva et al., 2019), with one of the studies highlighting financial struggles, academic challenges, and being far from home as major perceived stressors for university students (Cilar et al., 2019). One highlight from a study by Havelka (1995) was an apparent definition of stress as “a sum of total wearing of the body over the course of its lifespan” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Havelka, 1995; Mitreva, Gjorgieva, Filiposki & Gjorshevski, 2019, p. 166). This definition originally emanated from Lazarus and Folkman, who were considered two of the modern-day pioneers of stress research (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Havelka, 1995; Mitreva et al., 2019).

Social Support, Perceived Stress and Miscellaneous Student Themes

Articles relating to social support, perceived stress and miscellaneous themes accounted for thirteen percent of recent literature and included such themes as social support and student well-being (Maymon, Hall, Harley & Jason, 2019); social support for international students transitioning to work (Lertora, Sullivan & Jeffrey, 2019); perceptions of stress due to academic

studies and how it relates to other areas of student life (Bergmann, Muth & Loerbroks, 2019); coping strategies of veterinary students and the stigma attached to counseling (McArthur, Matthew, Brand, Andrews, Fawcett & Hazel, 2019); perceived stress and student food selection (Badreldin, Mahfouz & Mohamed, 2020); students who sought counseling services for various reasons such as academic challenges, financial struggles, health concerns, and emotional issues (Adubale & Aluede, 2019); stressors and adjustment of students engaged in distance learning (Mittelmeier, Rogaten, Long, Dalu, Gunter, Prinsloo & Rienties, (2019); student stressors triggered by Fall break (Agnew, Poole & Khan, 2019); cultural differences and ways provision of social support was perceived in two cultures (Lawley, Willett, Scollon & Lehman, 2019); stressors of American students studying abroad in China (Yang, 2020); the importance of social support from friends and family of African Americans (Chang, Chang, Rollock, Lui, Hirsch & Jeglic, 2019); interventions for stress overload in nursing students (Rayan, 2019); and social support as a predictor for persistence in students (Cooper, Gin, Akeeh, Clark, Hunter, Roderick, Elliott, Gutierrez, Mello, Pfeiffer, Scott, Arellano, Ramirez, Valdez, Vargas, Velarde, Zheng & Brownell, 2019). A broad dynamic of social support is that it is “important but adaptive...the perception that one has others who cares for them and can provide them with needed assistance” (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Chang, Chang, Rollock, Lui, Hirsch & Jeglic, 2019, p. 401). This epitomizes Maslow’s description of the human need “to seek to fulfil social needs, such as feeling a sense of belonging and establishing friendships” (Cooper, Gin, Akeeh, Clark, Hunter, Roderick, Elliott, Gutierrez, Mello, Pfeiffer, Scott, Arellano, Ramirez, Valdez, Vargas, Velarde, Zheng & Brownell, 2019 ,p. 4).

Social Support and Student-Related Stressors

The last category of articles reported, social support and student-related stressors, account for four percent of recent reviewed literature, and most closely mirror the present research. One study was concerned with the impact of family support, from family only, on resiliency in university students (Sahanowas & Halder, (2019). This contrasts with current emphasis on determining whether reported social support is linked with perceived life stressors in students. These study constructs are similar but not the same. A second study concentrated on whether there was an association between social support from close friends, classmates and social anxiety in high-schoolers (Coyle & Malecki, 2018) – in comparison to correlations between reported social support and perceived university student stressors. In like fashion to the above, the study concepts are close in nature, but not the same. A third study focused on possible connections between pervasiveness of burnout, alexithymia, perceived social support and perception of stress in medical students (Popa-Velea, Diaconescu, Mihăilescu, Popescu & Macarie, 2017) – which resembles, but is different to establishing whether links exist between reported social support and student perceptions of life stressors. Once again, these are analogous concepts, but they are not the same. Finally, a new study sought to discover possible correlations between psychological well-being, emotional intelligence and perceived social support in male university students (Malinauskas & Malinauskiene, 2020) – a variance on reported social support from friends, family and/or significant others and perceived life stressors of university students. These constructs are similar but distinguishable.

While research studies and literature reviewed up to the present time may have generated thousands of results for social support and stress in university students - to date, no previous study has considered whether a relationship exists between reported social support and perceived

life stressors in university students. This represents a clear gap in literature and is an area for ongoing future research.

Summary

What seems apparent is that there will be times when individuals need to speak to at least one other person about problems; that individuals will benefit from constructive advice from someone else; that sometimes a problem shared is a problem halved because at times the burden of internalizing stressors may become too much to bare alone; and that it is okay to need to trust someone else with a personal situation (Vaux, Burda & Stewart, 1986). There may be times when individuals are pessimistic and negative about having social support (Shapiro, 1988).

It has been said that prevention is better than cure (Borysiewicz, 2009). Considering the emphasis of the literature reviewed – it is hoped that the negative correlation found with regards to reported social support in university students and perceived life stressors – will result in two outcomes: (i) a greater emphasis being placed on fostering and strengthening the quality of social support relationships, and (ii) greater attention being placed on identifying and highlighting specific stressors to unique populations, in this instance, university students. In contrast to previous studies that appeared more focused on identifying social support as a useful intervention to minimize stressors already manifested in individuals - this study lends itself to a more practical approach to valuing and cultivating positive social supports, while naming and listing specific stressors, for example, not getting enough sleep, or failing a test (Corcoran & Fischer, 2013). It is hoped that this study will lead to further research advocacy for increasing social support networks in this population. By concentrating greater efforts on publicizing supports that are already in place and/or brainstorming practical, effective solutions to remedy

other stressors that were previously unidentified or unknown – university personnel may offer additional social supports for students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a relationship exists between university students' reported level of social support and the number of perceived stressors. Participants completed the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and the Undergraduate Student Questionnaire (USQ) questionnaires online. This allowed for the gathering of information regarding reported social support and perceived life stressors.

Design

This descriptive research design used Spearman's rank order correlation (Rho) to statistically analyze results from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire (Heppner, Wampold, Owen, Wang, & Thompson, 2015). The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support instrument yields an ordinal scale and quantitative data, while the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire yields a nominal scale. While the checklist used in the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire measurement tool is nominal in nature, the decision was made to measure stressors in terms of numbers, rather than by types of stressors - to allow for an easier analysis of whether there is a relationship between the two scales. Hence, number (latent variable) of stressors becomes interval, and latent variables of number of stressors, yields continuous data. After receiving approval from Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher completed two weeks of recruiting and data collection.

Research Question

RQ1: Is there a correlation between student's reported social support, as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and perceived life stressors, as measured by the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire?

Hypothesis

Perceived social support may impact perceived and reported stressors, even so much as decreasing stressors in general.

Ho: There is no correlation between student's reported social support and perceived life stressors.

Ha: There is a correlation between student's reported social support and perceived life stressors.

Participants and Setting

According to Heo (2014), planning for attrition in research is an important part of design strategy. As such, 225 students were recruited to allow for potential attrition and non-participation, even though only a sample population of 168 residential students from the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, in Lynchburg, Virginia were used. As per the guidance of the Number Cruncher Statistical System (NCSS), the sample size of 225 participants used in this study was based upon a two-sided, 95% confidence interval, with an estimated Spearman's rank correlation of -0.900 (NCSS, 2007). As per inclusion criteria, participants were at least 18 years of age or older, and either lived on-campus, or moved close to the university campus to pursue full-time or part-time studies during the 2019-2020 academic term. Any participants who were under the age of 18 were excluded from the study, as were participants who had not lived on a university campus or moved close to a university campus to pursue part-time or full-time studies at some point in the past semester.

Instrumentation

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support MSPSS is a twelve-item ordinal measure that was designed to measure social support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988).

Participant responses are rated using 7-point Likert scale, ranging from one (very strongly disagree) to seven (very strongly agree) (Zimet et al., 1988). The MSPSS is extremely reliable, and with alphas of .91 on the total scale and .90 to .95 on the subscales, the MSPSS has excellent internal consistency (Zimet et al., 1988). The MSPSS also has good concurrent validity and good factorial validity (Zimet et al., 1988).

The Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire USQ is an 83-item nominal measurement tool that is unique because the content for the items were generated with student input, to appeal to other students, and includes genuine daily stressors that are often missed or outdated in surveys (Corcoran & Fischer, 2013). In other words, the items used in the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire (USQ) were based on true-to-life experiences of undergraduate students (Crandall, Preisler & Aussprung, 1992). The Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire has a KR-21 coefficient of .80, which represents good internal consistency; and has a split-half reliability of .83 using the Spearman-Brown formula (Crandall, Preisler & Aussprung, 1992).

Procedures

An online survey was prepared via Qualtrics XM with a link to include rules and recruitment criteria; a consent form; a demographics collection sheet; and a confidentiality disclaimer. In this study, the researcher was interested in establishing whether a relationship exists between student reports of social support and life event stressors unique to university students. The researcher used descriptive statistics and employed Spearman's rank order correlation analysis, which allowed for a correlation of nominal and ordinal variables (Knight & Tetrault, 2017; Warner, 2012). The Likert scale is being treated as interval because the latent variable is continuous. This treatment allowed for easier analysis of relationship between the

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire.

Internal & External Validity

Internal Validity

Historical threats may occur when extraneous uncontrolled events outside of a study influence participant behavior (Heppner et al., 2015). To circumvent any historical threats to validity, ‘former’ residential students, and students living close to campus were asked to respond to perceived stressors that may have occurred within the present 2019-2020 academic term, instead of the past week. This is because a portion of stressors listed in the Undergraduate Student Questionnaire pertain to in-person, physical interactions between students - which may not have occurred in recent weeks due to social distancing and ‘stay-at-home orders in various states across the country.

External Validity

External threats to validity pertain to limitations on the replication of results should a study be duplicated (Warner, 2012). The two greatest potentials to external validity were selection bias and ‘real world’ versus ‘unreal world’ (Warner, 2012). With regards to selection bias, students were previously targeted based upon their residential status and proximity to campus. This reflected a potential threat, in that, not all students, live on campus or close to campus – for example, online students. It would be difficult to adjust selection of participants in this study or ‘real world’ versus ‘unreal world’ scenario, however, because the research premise was on how students report social support – when they are away from home. That said, adjusting the measurement tool to one that is not exclusive to students, such as the Brief Cope

Scale (Carver, 1997) and conducting a subsequent study including all students, regardless of their residential status, would be a way to prevent external threats to validity.

Data Analysis

Qualtrics XM was utilized and Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Rho statistical analysis were performed. This helped to determine whether reported social support was correlated with life stressors in students. Spearman's Rho correlation analyzed life event stressors from the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire measurement tool, as well as each of four sets of questions from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale centered around three specific categories of social support, namely: family, friends, and significant others (it is noted that a plethora of other entities of social support do exist, and that the categories considered in this research are not meant to be exhaustive or definitive categories of social support).

Summary

The importance of establishing that correlation existed between reported social support and perceived life event stressors in university students was crucial for proactively determining ways to enhance social support and reduce stressors in this population, who have been identified as highly susceptible to life event stressors, by virtue of their status as university students.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Upon completion of data collection derived from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support measurement tool and the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire, participant responses were recorded and analyzed using various statistical measures. Those findings are presented in this chapter.

Descriptive Statistics

While 225 participants were recruited for the study, 190 participants completed the survey, of which 22 participants were excluded because they did not meet residential or university status criteria. The remaining 168 participants formed the sample population. According to G* Power analysis, a total sample size of 80 was calculated for a large effect size a priori analysis, given an alpha of 0.05, and power of 0.95 (Department of Psychology, 2020) - hence, solidifying a strong, more than substantial, purposive sample size of 168 university students.

As per Table 1. demographics of the total sample population of 168 participants included (i) gender composition of 112 females (66.7%), 54 males (32.1%), one participant who identified as having a different gender identity (0.6%), and one participant who preferred not to comment on their gender (0.6%); (ii) age composition of participants ranging from 18 to 64 years, with the mean age of respondents as 21.5, thereby falling within the frequency of the 18-25 age group; and (iii) race/ethnicity composition including 122 black/African American participants (73.0%), 13 persons of two or more races (8.0%), 12 Caucasian participants (6.9%), and 8 Hispanic/Latino participants (4.6%).

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	112	66.7
Male	54	32.1
Different gender identity	1	0.6
I would prefer not to comment	1	0.6
Age		
18-25 years	143	85.1
26-49 years	21	12.5
50-64 years	4	2.4
65 and above	0	0
Race / Ethnicity		
American Indian / Native American	0	0.0
Asian or Pacific Islander	6	3.6
Black / African American	122	72.6
Hispanic / Latino	8	4.8
Two or more of the above	13	7.7
Unknown	3	1.8
White / Caucasian	12	7.1
I would prefer not to comment	4	2.4

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale was used to measure reported social support in participants (Zimet et al., 1988). This twelve-item instrument indicated high reliability ($\alpha = .91$) across a range of scores from 12 to 84 ($M=48.0$, $SD = 21.22$). Low scores were indicative of lower reported social support, while high scores were indicative of higher reported social support in participants (Zimet et al., 1988). Of the 12 items

on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, the questions that recorded the highest levels of social support included: (i) My family really tries to help me (33.5%); (ii) There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings (32.7%); (ii) There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows (31.7%); (iii) I have friends with whom I can share joys and sorrows (30.4%); and (iv) I can talk about my problems with my friends (30.5%). Table 2. illustrates ‘Very Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Very Strongly Agree’ total reported percentages of social support, by question, on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support.

Table 2

Total Percentage of Reported Social Support (Strongly Disagree & Agree Only) By Question

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (in Percentages)	<u>Very Strongly</u> <u>Disagree %</u>	<u>Very Strongly</u> <u>Agree %</u>
1. There is a special person who is around when I am in need.	6.0	23.2
2. There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows.	4.2	31.7
3. My family really tries to help me.	4.2	24.0
4. I get the emotional help and support I need from.	3.6	17.9
5. I have a special person who is a real source of.	6.5	28.0
6. My friends really try to help me.	1.2	16.8
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong.	3.0	16.2
8. I can talk about my problems with my family.	6.3	11.3
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	3.6	20.8
10. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.	5.4	32.7
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions.	2.4	21.4
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends.	3.0	18.6

The Undergraduate Scale of Perceived Social Support scale was used to measure perceived life stressors (Crandall et al., 1992). This 83-item checklist measurement showed good reliability ($\alpha = .83$) across a range of scores from 1 to 83 ($M=42.0$, $SD = 24.10$). In this scale, life event stressors were definitively determined by totaling the number of stressor items indicated by participants (Crandall et al., 1992). Out of a possible 83 items, Figure 1. highlights Scores of the ten most frequently highlighted stressors on the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire include: (1) lots of deadlines to meet = 99(58.9%); (2) thoughts about future = 85(50.6%); (3) had projects, research papers due = 80(47.6%); (4) no sleep = 78(46.4%); (5) had lots of tests = 77(45.8%); (6) feel disorganized = 76(45.2%); (7) lack of money = 68(40.5%); (8) it's finals week = 65(38.7%); (9) went into a test unprepared = 65(38.7%); and (10) crammed for a test = 65(38.7%). Table 3. details statistical analysis scores of total life event stressors reported by participants.

Table 3

Analysis of Total Life Event Stressors at 95% Confidence Level

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Median</u>	<u>Mode</u>	<u>SD</u>
Undergraduate Scale of Perceived Social Support	28	27	28	23.59

Results

Hypothesis

The prediction was that there would a correlation between student's reported social support and perceived life stressors. While the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire is an ordinal scale, for statistical analysis purposes, it is being treated as interval to allow for smoother analysis between the two scales. Table 4. (see below) illustrates a series of Spearman's rank-

order correlations that were conducted to analyze life event stressors in students (indicated on the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire) – in relation to a series of questions pertaining to three sources of social support: family, friends, and significant others (as indicated on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support). A two-tailed test of significance indicated (i) a statistically significant relationship between reported social support from friends and perceived stressors ($r_s = 0.4$, $p = 0.6$) i.e. reported social support from friends was a positive indicator of reduced perceived stressors in students; (ii) a weak negative relationship between reported support from significant others and perceived stressors ($r_s = -0.7746$, $p = .2254$) i.e. perceived stressors barely reduced in line with greater reported social support from significant others; and (iii) a moderate positive correlation between reported social support from family and perceived stressors ($r_s = 0.258$, $p = .7418$) i.e. reported social support modestly reduced perceived stressors in students.

Table 4

Correlations Between Undergraduate Scale of Perceived Social Support (Stressors) and Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Support)

Variable	<i>Stressors</i>	<i>Support</i>
Life Stressors	.20	-
Perceived Social Support	-	.05
Family Support	.741	> 0.50
Friend Support	.60	.010
Significant Other Support	.225	> 0.50

Note: n = 168

A statistically significant correlation ($r_s = .48062$, $p = .11373$) between perceived stressors and reported social support revealed sufficient grounds to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis that there is a correlation between reported social support and perceived stressors in university students.

Summary

The findings of university students' reports of social support and perceived life event stressors were shared in this chapter. The focus of this research was on establishing whether a correlation exists between university student's reported social support, and perceived life event stressors. Descriptive statistics were used to collect data, challenge inferences, and justify rejecting the null hypothesis in favor of accepting the alternate hypothesis - that there is a correlation between student's reported social support and perceived life stressors. The outcome of statistical analysis confirmed significant negative correlation between reported levels of social support and perceived number of stressors in university students.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

By way of defending and giving explanation for the inferences made in this research a discussion of results was compared, and contrasted, with present studies, and prior findings, where applicable. After a review of study implications and limitations, this chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a relationship between university student's reported social support and perceived stressors. Inasmuch as an abundance of research already exists regarding reported social support in individuals or identifying stress and ways to decrease it, there is insufficient literature that specifically explores whether there is an association between definitive student stressors and reported social support in students. The intention of this research was to establish whether there is there a correlation between student's reported social support, as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and perceived life stressors, as measured by the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire.

Participants were asked to indicate whether they sensed or intuited support, encouragement, assistance, and validation from person's around them physically and/or emotionally by completing the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988). Participants were also asked to identify life stressors events that resonated with them, as denoted in the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire (Crandall et al., 1992). While research studies and literature reviewed up to the present time may have generated thousands of results for social support and stress in university students - to date, no previous study has considered whether a relationship exists between reported social support and perceived life stressors in

university students. Previous literature does, however, state that students may perceive social support from a variety of sources including family, friends, romantic partners, spiritual leaders, academic mentors and employers (Zimet et al., 1988; Williams, 2019; Chatters et al., 2018; Nyadanu et al., 2015; Xesha et al., 2014).

While it was predicted that there would be a perfect negative correlation between reported social support and perceived stressors, a statistically significant ($r_s = 0.49$) medium association effect was found to exist between the variables. It was anticipated, in keeping with previous literature findings, that reported social support would foster resiliency (Sahanowas & Halder, 2019), in addition to family support being heralded as an antidote for well-adjusted coping and managing of student life (Arias de la Torre et al., 2019). One major explanation for why Spearman's rho did not reveal perfect negative association, or a more statistically significant result may be due to the participant's reporting of themselves. Approximately 98% (165) of study participants regarded themselves as being well supported. According to scoring guidelines for the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, within a score range of 12-84, a triad separation of scores into three categories was recommended to reflect the following: scores 1-28 (Low Support); scores 29-56 (Medium Support); and scores 57-84 (High Support) (Zimet et al., 1988). Lower scores indicated lower perceived social support from family, friends, and significant others; while higher scores indicated higher perceived social support from family, friends, and significant others. With 1.79% of respondents scored as having low support, 32.1% of respondents scored as having medium support, and 66% of respondents scored as having high support – it seems plausible that similar to the analogy of 'preaching to the choir' – barring the 3 individuals who scored low for support, the remaining 165 participants were already well supported. In other words, perhaps a true interpretation of whether a correlation exists between

reported social support and perceived stressors, was not possible to establish because in 98% of the cases, strong social support was already established, and reported in the lives of the majority of student participants.

One of the benefits of using an anonymous survey is to prevent social desirability bias (Warner, 2012). Such may also account for the considerable volume of respondents who identified as having substantial social support. One suggestion for future studies to reduce the likelihood of unknowingly duplicating recruitment from those who already report supportive social networks, would be to garner a wider sample population of more categories of students; for example, commuter students, and online students. That said, it is a positive that so many students reported strong social support networks, which may subconsciously be a pre-disposed factor that enabled participants to pursue and sustain university education.

The human need for belongingness, as identified by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, speaks to the requisites of companionship, love, intimacy (Stilton et al., 2011) and acceptance. Regardless of the source of social support, the perception of social support seems to be a fundamental component of the innate desire and fabric of humankind to be wanted, and needed, by others (Abulof, 2017). That the highest weighted response to a question (33.5%) "*My family really tries to help me*" (Corcoran & Fischer, 2013, p. 542), centered around stated social support of families – is a meaningful and noteworthy attestation to studies that focus on the influence and impact of upholding health family relationships (Sahanowas & Halder, 2019; Arias de la Torre et al., 2019; Delker, et al., 2018; Silton et al., 2011). Overall, based upon an analysis of results from categories of reported social support i.e. from friends, family, and significant others – the following observations were made.

Friends

As referenced in a wealth of earlier research surrounding Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, one study asserted that friendship fulfills the human social needs for "a sense of belonging" (Cooper, Gin, Akeeh, Clark, Hunter, Roderick, Elliott, Gutierrez, Mello, Pfeiffer, Scott, Arellano, Ramirez, Valdez, Vargas, Velarde, Zheng & Brownell, 2019, p.4). It was determined that friends appeared to provide the greatest source of support to university students, based upon a sum of the most 'Strongly Agreed' and 'Very Strongly Agreed' responses applied to the four questions pertaining to friends as a source of social support (n = 316). The questions regarding friends from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support were: Questions 6 - "My friends really try to help me"; Question 7 - "I can count on my friends when things go wrong"; Question 9 - "I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows"; and Question 12 - "I can talk about my problems with my friends" (Corcoran & Fischer, 2013, p. 542). Friendships solidified the third lowest scores, for 'Strongly Disagree' and 'Very Strongly Disagree' (n = 34), recorded in response to the above questions.

Family

While it could be argued that reported social support is not a requirement for "being in harmony with the environment" (Konan, Durmus, Agiroglu Bakir, & Turkoglu, 2018, p. 245), Konan et al., (2018) it does appear that the essence of social support may be a tool or catalyst for persons' to being able to discuss problems with their families (Konan et al., 2018). It was determined that family provided the second greatest source of support to university students, based upon a sum of the most 'Strongly Agreed' and 'Very Strongly Agreed' responses applied to the four questions pertaining to family as a source of social support (n = 293). The questions regarding friends from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support were: Question 3

- “My family really tries to help me”; Question 4 - “I get the emotional help and support I need from my family”; Question 8 – “I can talk about my problems with my family”; and Question 11 – “My family is willing to help me make decisions” (Corcoran & Fischer, 2013, p. 542). Family solidified second place as providers of social support, determined by with the second lowest scores for ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Very Strongly Disagree’ (n = 63), recorded in response to the above questions.

Significant Others

Prior literature validates the rightful place of significant others in providing social support for individuals. One study, in particular, references significant others as being persons who are a source of comfort, who avail themselves to be present when needed, and who validate individual’s feelings during low times, whilst sharing victories during high times (Zimet, Dahlem, Ximet & Farley, 1998). It was determined that significant others provided the least source of social support to university students, based upon a sum of the most ‘Strongly Agreed’ and ‘Very Strongly Agreed’ responses applied to the four questions pertaining to significant others as a source of social support (n = 212). The questions regarding friends from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support were: Questions 1 - “There is a special person who is around when I am in need”; Question 2 - “There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows”; Question 5 – “I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me”; and Question 10 – “There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings” (Corcoran & Fischer, 2013, p. 542). The third place of significant others as providers of social support was solidified with the lowest scores for ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Very Strongly Disagree’ (n = 70) recorded in response to the above questions.

Implications

The significance and impact of reported social support from family in relation to perceived stressors on university students raised several considerations for further research in this study. Three overarching implications arising from this study are: (i) the non-impact of divorce as a stressor; (ii) the family as helpers; and (iii) emotional support and the family.

Firstly, only three students (1.6%) indicated on the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire that ‘parent’s getting a divorce’ was a life event stressor for them (Zimet et al., 1988). There are numerous likely explanations for how and why parental divorce only factored as a stressor for 3 out of 168 university students including (i) divorce rates may be declining overall in society (Carter & McGoldrick, 2016); (ii) in keeping with trends of the modern day family, more couples may be cohabiting resulting in fewer dependents emanating from married households (Carter & McGoldrick, 2016); an increase in single-parent family led homes; and (iv) the possibility that university students are not as impacted by parental divorce as was previously reported (Morrison, Stephen, Fife & Hertlein, 2017); (v) or the possibility that the physical distance of being away from home perhaps translated into an emotional disconnect in light of other more pressing immediate stressors for the university student. An obligation of the Christian church is to minister to all aspects of marriage and family relationships, including divorce. As such, it is crucial for Christian counselors and the global Christian movement to keep abreast of changing family and relationship dynamics within societies, so as to remain effective in offering appropriate ministries and outreach opportunities.

Secondly, the highest scoring statement overall on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support – across all three domains of support mentioned on this measurement scale (family, friends, significant others) was in response to question three: *“My family really*

tries to help me” (Corcoran & Fischer, 2013, p. 542). Nearly 40% of students ‘Strongly Agreed’ with this statement, with an additional 25% of students ‘Very Strongly Agreeing’ with the statement. Essentially, more than two-thirds of respondents conveyed their families endeavor to help, assist, benefit, comfort and support them. Whether families effectively alleviated or worsened circumstances falls beyond the scope of relevance in this instance because emphasis was placed upon the favorable, well-meaning intentions behind family motivations to help. That students acknowledged the genuine efforts of help from family is an encouraging indicator that perhaps more families can learn and be trained on how to demonstrate and extend further support to other family members. Galatians 6:2 offers an applicable family model for helping and supporting others, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (The English Standard Version).

Finally, two-thirds of students disagreed with the statement: “*I get the emotional help and support I need from my family*” – question four on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support measurement tool (Corcoran & Fischer, 2013, p. 542). Dramatically, this result may suggest a significant proportion of students have emotional needs that are unmet, which could in turn lead to, or become, contributory to life event stressors. Admittedly, on the one hand, it could be deemed unfair to expect family to be equipped to handle the mental health needs of its members – but receiving emotional health and social support from the right source, e.g. marriage and family counselors, mental health practitioners, or pastoral counselors, is important. Perhaps an orientation of university students towards the benefits of religious/spiritual beliefs in a Higher Power may offer comfort and encouragement in times of need. Psalms 121:1-2 offers this assurance, “I will lift up my eyes to the hills - from whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (The New King

James Version). Marriage and Family therapists have a unique opportunity to work with families and help them foster ways to be more present and aware of each other's feelings. With commitment - concentrated, well-intentioned efforts to improve social support within families may lead to reduced perceived stressors in university students.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of this study is that it focused on the perceived social support and stressors of residential students and/or students who moved close to a university campus. Stress is likely not exclusive to any student group irrespective of where they reside i.e. whether they live on campus, close to campus, commute to campus, or study online. In other words, the physical residence of a student, may or may not exempt him or her from potential stressors associated with studying. As such, it would be prudent for future studies to include all students, regardless of whether they commute from their homes to a campus on a daily basis, and also to include those students who engage in online learning nationally, and internationally.

A further limitation of this study is that it focuses exclusively on the stressors of university students, without consideration for the scores of individuals who may not be engaged in full-time or part-time studies – but who may be experiencing similar stressors in their daily lives. Incorporating the responses of these individuals and allowing for comparisons between student and non-student groups in future studies may prove relevant in formulating and implementing forthcoming measures to reduce stressors in individuals overall.

A final limitation of this study is that while it highlights human beings as givers or providers of social support, it fails to acknowledge other living entities, such as pets, or non-living entities, such as going to the gym or meditating - as other potential systems of support. While 'social support' may typically be associated with relationships and interactions between

humans beings, a strong case could be made for other entities who may not categorically qualify as ‘social’ supports per se (within the context of human social relationships) - but whose presence or existence emulates systems or practices of support, and provide a sense of comfort to individuals during times of stress. With the overriding ethos of this study being to contribute to reducing stressors in individuals, it is hoped that ongoing research studies will continue in this area.

Recommendations for Future Study

The main recommendation for further study centers around virtual support, and the implications of virtual social support. The worldwide platform for virtual support via communication channels has been so extensively established that research suggests it may almost seem impossible to ignore the magnitude of virtual technology and life without it (Konan, Durmus, Agiroglu Bakir, & Turkoglu, 2018; Akturk & Budak, 2019; Colak & Dogan, 2016; Coulson, 2017; Ghatak & Singh, 2019; Kuang-Yuan Huang, Chengalur-Smith & Pinsonneault, 2019; Naseri, Mohamadi, Sayehmiri & Azizpoor, 2015). The rise of smartphone technology alone now facilitates unprecedented access to strangers and loved ones across the globe, via the world wide web (Konan et al., 2018). Any former restrictions, limitations or margins for perceived social support fully extend beyond in-person face-to-face interactions, audible two-way phone calls, and snail mail letters (Joo & Teng, 2017). The ushering in of a new wave of virtual connection and social support through the advent of live chat, instant messaging, real time video calling and the like, has propelled availability of social support (Akturk & Budak, 2019) beyond measure - but research suggests it is too early to determine just how effective, and whether, reported virtual social support compares with the benefits of reported social support (Konan et al., 2018). More and more studies are beginning to investigate the logistics of

reported virtual social support from family, friends and significant others – including the plausibility of social support derived from social media platforms (Naseri et al., 2015; Colak & Dugan, 2016) such as Facebook, Instagram and Snap Chat. Along with ongoing research to explore advantages, this is research that should continue, in order to determine the likely effects or impact of virtual social support.

An offshoot of virtual technological advancement and virtual support systems destined to revolutionize the way modern healthcare is delivered is e-health, also referred to as telehealth (Hajli, Shanmugam, Hajli, Khani & Wang, 2015). E-health has been defined as the “delivery of healthcare via electronic platforms, allow[s] for the facilitation of communication between medical and mental health professionals with patients/clients” (Hajli, Shanmugam, Hajli, Khani & Wang, 2015, p. 335). By unprecedented default, e-health appeared at the forefront of the healthcare system in the United States, in the wake of the present Coronavirus pandemic and COVID-19, and now appears to be in full operation in many states across America (Bashshur, Doam, Frenk, Kvedar & Woolliscroft, 2020). In light of social distancing, stay-at-home orders, and medically mandated separations of family, friends and significant others to efforts to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 – the unprecedented need for virtual social support is perhaps, more-timely, and relevant, than ever before.

Summary

The outcomes of this study highlight that there is a correlation between reported social support and perceived stressors in university students. As such, the fostering and strengthening of any and all positive, healthy social support relationships deserves greater attention. It is hoped that by identifying and highlighting some of the specific stressors unique to this population – that further research advocacy will lead to concentrated, greater efforts to re-

publicize existing social supports, while effectively brainstorming innovative new solutions to remedy a known concern (Manzar, Salahuddin, Peter, Alghadir, Anser, Bahammam & Pandi-Perumal, 2019). Social support centers around “the perception that one has others who care[s] for them and provide them with needed assistance” (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Chang, Chang, Rollock, Lui, Hirsch & Jeglic, 2019, p. 401). If life event stressors (Mahani & Panchal, 2019) can be reduced significantly by a sense of belongingness, connection, association, attachment and relationship (Abulof, 2017), then it seems a promotion of the “important protective factor” (Tinajero, Martinez-Lopez, Guisande & Paramo, 2014, p. 221) of social support may serve students well as they transition through university.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

irb@liberty.edu
Wed 5/13/2020 12:18 PM

To: Evans-Thompson, Courtney T (Ctr for Counseling & Family Studies); Winckler, Pearl



May 13, 2020

Pearl Winckler
Courtney Evans-Thompson

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY19-20-294 Considering the Impact of Social Support and Student Perceptions of Life Stress

Dear Pearl Winckler, Courtney Evans-Thompson:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:
101(b):

Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the

Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM

Consent
Title of the Project: Considering the Impact of Social Support and Student Perceptions of Life Stress
Investigator: Pearl J. Winckler, Doctoral Candidate – Liberty University
Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
<p>You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) be at least 18 years of age or older; (ii) be a university student in full-time or part-time studies; and (iii) have lived on-campus, or moved close to campus, at some point, during the current academic school year. <p>Taking part in this research project is voluntary.</p> <p>Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.</p>
What is the study about and why is it being done?
<p>The purpose of the study is to determine whether student's reported social support from family, friends, and/or significant others is likely to impact student's perceptions of life stressors. This study is subjective in nature, which means it is expected that participant responses will vary according to personal experiences and situations. There are no right or wrong responses.</p>
What will happen if you take part in this study?
<p>If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Complete a Brief Demographic Form (approximately 2 minutes). 2. Complete the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support survey (MSPSS) – (approximately 10 minutes); AND 3. Complete the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire (USQ) – (approximately 10 minutes).
How could you or others benefit from this study?
<p>Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.</p>

<p>Benefits to society include a possible increase in the awareness from interested persons, such as university personnel and members of society, of university student support needs and stressors. This may lead to greater resources being available to students in the future.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">What risks might you experience from being in this study?</p>
<p>The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">How will personal information be protected?</p>
<p>The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participant responses will be anonymous, which means the researcher will not be able to link data to participants. ▪ Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
<p style="text-align: center;">Is study participation voluntary?</p>
<p>Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?</p>
<p>If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?</p>
<p>The researcher conducting this study is Pearl J. Winckler. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at pwinckler@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Courtney Evans-Thompson at cevans75@liberty.edu.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?</p>
<p>If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Your Consent</p>
<p>Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.</p>

Appendix C

**PERMISSION LETTER MULTIDIMENSIONAL SCALE OF PERCEIVED
SOCIAL SUPPORT**

April 7, 2020

Ms. Pearl J. Winckler
Doctoral Student
Community Care & Counseling
Liberty University
Virginia

Dear Ms. Winckler:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled "Considering the Impact of Social Support and Student Perceptions of Life Stress", I have decided to grant you permission to use the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) for your research study.

[I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.]

Sincerely,

Gregory Zimet, Ph.D.
Professor of Pediatrics and Clinical Psychology
Indiana University School of Medicine

Appendix D

MULTIDIMENSIONAL SCALE OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT

Removed to comply with copyright. Please see link below for online access to the instrument:

<https://12fab08f-d2d3-ce70-6d1a->

[9d3fa0d8a67b.filesusr.com/ugd/5119f9_2f88fadcd382463daf5821e8af94a865.pdf](https://12fab08f-d2d3-ce70-6d1a-9d3fa0d8a67b.filesusr.com/ugd/5119f9_2f88fadcd382463daf5821e8af94a865.pdf)

Appendix E

UNDERGRADUATE STRESS QUESTIONNAIRE

Removed to comply with copyright. Please see link below for online access to the instrument:

<https://35ht6t2ynx0p1ztf961h81r1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Undergraduate-Stress-Questionnaire.pdf>