

Social Support and Subjective Well-Being: *The Critical Role of Mediator*

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ABSTRACT

Social support is essential for subjective well-being. Current evidence indicating that social support has powerful positive influences on our subjective well-being. It should be noted that mediators existing within the individual level, the relationship or family level, and the social level could exert a mediating effect on the correlation between social support and subjective well-being. This review summarizes research conducted in university student group and the elderly group, and identifies several mediators including parenting style, self-evaluation, personality, loneliness and self-concept. Determining potential mediators also helps to understand how they play a role in mediating the relationship between social support and individual's subjective well-being so that we can make more targeted and efficient intervention to help people improve their subjective well-being as well as their mental and physical health.

Keywords: *Subjective well-being, social support, social relationships, mental and physical health.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social support is adaptive and crucial for mental and physical health. Perceived social support is deemed to have the capacity to help individuals relieve the stress in daily life, thus benefit to our subjective well-being. As one key dimension of social connectedness, social support has various sources, which include families, schools, work places, government and social organizations, etc. Therefore, most current research about social support has taken the universality of the subject, the diversity of support content (includes emotional support, material support, behavioral support and information support), and the flexibility of support methods into consideration.

Subjective well-being has two components, including an affective and cognitive component. Affective components consist of positive and negative emotions. Cognitive components are also about the individuals' satisfaction with life. "Life satisfaction refers to a tendency to report satisfaction with various aspects of one's life" [1].

In past decades, scientists and researchers have conducted a large amount of research and have demonstrated that social support is an important predictor of subjective well-being. Receiving more

social support is associated with a higher level of subjective well-being. It should be noted that in most current studies, social support influences individuals' subjective well-being via the influence various mediators. For example, the university student who received high-quality social support from his or her family is inclined to have strong sense of self-confidence and positive self-evaluation. In addition to that, powerful social support is linked to positive emotion and self-concept in elderly adult groups. With these mediators, social support has positive influence on subjective well-being.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze research that conducted in two different groups, and discuss about existing mediators, which tend to affect the correlation between social support and subjective well-being.

2. THE MAIN SOURCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND THE ROLE OF MEDIATOR

Previous studies have proven that individuals with better social support tend to show higher subjective well-being levels. They are more satisfied with their life and, moreover, had more positive emotions and less negative emotions [2].

However, the correlation between social support and subjective well-being has variability in different research reports. Researchers (Song Jiameng and Fan Huiyong) speculated that might be due to the study characteristic effect [3]. They collected 86 dissertations according to strict and specific standards, for example, the survey data must be collected during ordinary life. Researchers summarized four potential influence factors: the type of publication, the time of publication, the type of scale, and the group of participants. Researchers have indicated that the first three types would not influence the consequences. However, the group of participants plays an essential role in mediating the correlation between social support and subjective well-being. The result reflects a significant difference between the old group and the disabled group, which indicates that the difference in the psychological state among different groups might result in group effect. The research considers that social skills, individual identity achievement and esteem could exert a regulatory effect on the relationship between social support and subjective well-being.

This article mainly selects two participant groups with a wide age gap as examples. One is the university students, which is the stage to achieve their own goals and to fulfil themselves. Most elderly adults are in the last stage of their lives and have realized their value. Through analyzing research conducted on these groups, it can identify whether the mediators in the relationship between social support and subjective well-being in different groups are similar, if not, what factors may exert a mediating role in different groups.

2.1 The University Students

As an external factor, social support exerts influence on subjective well-being through extremely complex mediators, covering the aspects of personality, cognitive and emotional. Among these mediators, parenting style and self-evaluation are frequently studied in university student samples.

2.1.1 Parenting style

Psychological research has examined this prospectively in a university student sample to determine the participants' subjective well-being levels are whether good predictors of what they perceived from the social support (family support, private individual support, friends support) [1]. The senior students studying at Erzincan University Faculty of Education Primary Teacher Training Department in the academic year 2009-2010 have participated in the survey. The data have been obtained from 33 male and 54 female students ($n = 87$) who participate as volunteers from a 200 people group. Researchers use the "Subjective Well-Being Scale" and "Multi-dimensional

Perceived Social Support Scale". It was found that perceived social support predicted 43 percent of subjective well-being. However, social support received from the family received explains 18 percent of subjective well-being variance ($R: .428$, $R^2: .18$). On the other hand, it was discovered that perceived social support towards a special person and a friend (PSS) has no impact on subjective well-being. The findings of this study show that the perceived social support received from family is a significant predictor of subjective well-being, the perceived social support received from a special person and perceived social support received from a friend are not predictors of subjective well-being.

The variance having the maximum ability to predicting subjective well-being is the perceived social support received from family. Researchers explained that the caregivers, especially the children's parents, play an important role in fostering children's sense of self-confidence during the process of cognitive development. American psychologist Diana Baumrind suggested there are four types of parenting styles, which are authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful respectively. The authoritative parents are willing to understand and respect their children. They usually treat their children with a positive attitude, respond to children's needs and behaviors in time, respect and encourage children to express their own opinions and viewpoints. Children who grow up in this way normally have a strong sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. They are also good at self-control and solving problems. In addition to that, they are willing to communicate with others and adapt to new environments quickly. Therefore, all these traits contribute to portraying their lives more positive and satisfactory.

2.1.2 Self-evaluation

Several recent published reviews and meta-analyses in China also synthesize the relevant data. Researchers take students' core self-evaluations into account, which be regarded as an essential mediator that should not be ignored [4]. Methods cluster random sampling was used for selecting 970 university students. Researchers required them to finish the questionnaire, which consists of the Social Support Scale, Core Self-Evaluation Scale, and Subjective Well-Being Scale. The correlation analysis indicates that there is a positive correlation among social support, positive emotion and individuals' satisfaction with life, whereas there is a negative correlation between social support and negative emotion. Aside from that, regression analysis indicates an interesting finding, which demonstrates that both social support and core self-evaluation can influence the indicators (include individual's satisfaction on life, positive emotion and negative emotion) of subjective well-being. However, when the variable of core

self-evaluation emerges, the explanatory power of social support decreased. Although social support can influence the indicators of subjective well-being, the decreased part of this influence is result from an individual's core self-evaluation.

Researchers conclude that the main form of perceived social support includes substantial support, emotional support, cognitive information support and linguistic support. Perceiving more social support is linked to increasing the students' confidence to overcome difficulties and forming affirmative assessments to themselves, therefore helps to boost the development of their core self-evaluations, which contributes to the improvement of subjective well-being. Meanwhile, when the individual has a high level of self-evaluation, they are more willing to accept social support from family, school, friends and classmates.

Therefore, scientists now have robust evidence indicating that for most university students, social support derives from families has a powerful influence on individual's subjective well-being. In addition to that, students' self-evaluations can be regarded as a mediator, which could explain the relationship between social support and subjective well-being to some extent.

2.2 The Elderly Adults

With the development of the economy, the improvement of health care, and the increased longevity, the proportion of the old in the total population is increasing year by year. And their mental health gained broad attention from different fields of the society [5]. Overcoming depression and anxiety is the first priority to many elderly people. These psychological problems can negatively affect individual's subjective well-being, or even, their physical health. In one study [6], researchers recruited 149 migrant older adults from five communities in Chongqing, China, and examined the mediating effect of physical resilience between social support and health-related quality of life (HRQOL). They found that social support and psychological resilience were positively associated with physical and mental HRQOL among migrant older adults.

2.2.1 Personality

A large amount of research has demonstrated that for the elderly, the correlation between social support and subjective well-being is mediated by some other factors. Researchers recruited elderly people who live in the countryside as the participant, and they have proven that the elderly's personality, loneliness, economic income and residential type can exert mediating effect on the relationship between social support and subjective well-being.

In the first study, the consequence indicates that the three dimensions of personality are linked to social support and the elderly's subjective well-being [7]. To be specific, there is a positive correlation between extraversion and subjective well-being, whereas neuroticism and psychoticism are associated with a lower level of subjective well-being. This finding indicates that the elderly who are extroverted tend to gain more social support. They have positive affective experience, high-level of satisfaction and better utilization of perceived social support. In addition to that, emotional stability is an essential predictor of keeping a relatively high-level of subjective well-being. The elderly with stable emotion is good at adjusting their own expectation according to different conditions so that they can evaluate the surroundings objectively, which is beneficial to adapt new environment and improve their subjective well-being.

2.2.2 Loneliness

In another study, researchers examined the mediating effect of loneliness among the empty-nesters who live in the countryside in Guizhou, China [8]. Researchers suggested that the more social support they received, the less sense of loneliness they feel, and they will have a higher level of subjective well-being. Compared with elderly people who live with their daughter or son, the empty-nesters lack of communication with intimate family members, therefore they are prone to feel boring and lonely. Human beings are social animals, throughout the lifespan, social connections continue to play a vital role [9]. Much as thirst drives one to consume water, loneliness may be a biologically adaptive response motivating one to reconnect with socially [9]. However, population in the rural area is less than the urban area, it is hard for the elderly to resort to social support and keep in touch with significant others, especially for those who had to being single. An accumulated sense of loneliness lapses the elderly into negative emotions and results in low-level of subjective well-being.

2.2.3 Self-concept

General self-concept and depression, exerting mediating effect on the relationship between social support and subjective well-being via emotions either. Chao Qiuling and Wu Jianqian examined that social support can indirectly affect subjective well-being through self-concept, which is the perception and evaluation of their own [10]. Researchers found that the old adults who live in a supporting surrounding tend to gain more positive information from the source of their social support and thus having a positive evaluation to themselves, which is beneficial for them to have a high level of subjective well-being. It is worth noting that, too much objective support will decrease the elderly's

subjective well-being. According to Carl Rogers, the elderly hope to be able to affirm themselves, maintain self-esteem, and obtain subjective well-being through pursuing self-actualization. Excessive objective support might make the elderly feel that they are the burden of the whole family and tend to underestimate their living capacity, which is associated with the decrease of their subjective well-being. Thus, only appropriate social support that meets the psychological needs of the elderly can play a positive role to the full extent.

Therefore, a large amount of research has illustrated that stable emotion, low-level of loneliness and positive self-concept are associated with gaining more social support, more positive affect and self-evaluation respectively, and, therefore, result in higher level of subjective well-being as well as mental and physical health.

3. CONCLUSION

There is a large amount of substantial evidence that social support has a positive effect on subjective well-being and mental health and, conversely, that lacking support is linked to risk [9]. To be specific, people who are more socially tend to lead a longer, healthier and happier life, thus have higher level of subjective well-being. However, the risk is normally related to lack social support via loneliness and social isolation. According to research, for most university students, self-evaluation and self-esteem play an important role in mediating the relationship between social support and subjective well-being. In addition to that, for most elderly adults, personality, loneliness and general self-concept exert mediating effect on the relationship between social support and subjective well-being.

These studies, however, were conducted on university students and elderly samples. Only few current studies aim at people with special needs, for example, children with autism, parent-absent students in primary school, junior high school and senior high school, people with hearing disorder or other diseases (such as cancer patients or people with heart disease). In addition to that, the participant group lack representativeness. It should be noted that many factors, which are associated with culture, economy and policy, could influence local residents' personality, residential type and parenting style, which have been proven an exerting mediating effect on the relationship between social support and subjective well-being. Moreover, these studies often target only one component of mediators (e.g., self-evaluation or loneliness), making it difficult to compare findings across studies.

Therefore, future research should consider people with special needs, find out what may affect the relationship between social support and their subjective

well-being via different mediators so that we can design a more efficient intervention for them. It is important to determine mediators for the purpose of predicting and identifying those which are most helpful to improve individuals' subjective well-being. Apart from that, a larger sample could have provided greater statistical power, which allows the consequences of the research to be used in a larger scale.

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