Family Social Support and Family Intrusiveness in Young Adult Women

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ABSTRACT. This study reports on the relationship between perceived family social support [FSS] and family intrusiveness [FI] in a sample of young adult women. These family system variables were hypothesized to be inversely correlated. The potential for a positive correlation was also explored to determine whether or not family support can coincide with deleterious intrusive social interaction. Results of the study showed an inverse correlation rather than positive. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Family Social Support

Perceived Social Support relies on interpersonal networks and the extent to which an individual believes his or her needs for support, information, and feedback are fulfilled through interpersonal processes (Caplan, 1974; Procidano, 1978 & 1983). It consists of transactions with others that provide the recipient with emotional support, affirmation of self, appraisal of the situation, instrumental support, and information (House, 1981; Vaux, 1988). More contemporary studies have defined social support as a person's generalized cognitive appraisal of being supported by important members of social networks such as family, friends, and significant others rather than actual enacted behaviors (Dunkel-Schetter&Bennett, 1990; Lakey & Cassady, 1990; Lakey & Drew, 1997; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990).

There is evidence that family social support (FSS) is related to numerous factors in our lives including loneliness (Corty & Young, 1980), social isolation and disintegration (Leighton, 1959), stress and a buffer to stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Ologun & Ibigbami, 2006), self esteem (Brown, Andrews, Harris, Adler, and Bridge, 1986; Orshan, 1999), adjustment (Weihs et. al., 2005; Mfusi & Mahabeer, 2000), positive affect (McCaskill & Lakey, 2000), adult attachment styles and coping strategies (Ognibene & Collins, 1998), general physical health (Krause et. al., 2006; Fujita, 2003), and recovery from illness (Hurdle, 2001; Taky & McCubbin, 2002). In general, research suggests that it is not the amount of social support *per se* that is protective, but the positive interpretation of the interactions of the individual (Lyons, Perrotta, & Hancher-Kvam 1988; Heller, Swindle, & Dusenbury, 1986).

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Family intrusiveness (FI) is relative level of emotional involvement and management of its members on two primary tasks: regulation of internal boundaries and the way in which boundaries are managed with regard to consequences for individuals and the family (Minuchin, 1974; Gavazzi, Reese & Sabatelli, 1998). Theoretically, this is the family system's degree of tolerance for the individuality and autonomy of its members is a function of boundaries between subsystems (Hess & Handel, 1985). Family system involvement is managed by these boundaries and is understood as the degree to which a family promotes intimacy and minimizes conflict and inappropriate intrusiveness (Bartle-Haring & Gavazzi, 1996; Gavazzi, 1993, 1994). Boundaries can be managed with low levels of intrusiveness (low intimacy and high conflict) or high intrusiveness (high intimacy and low conflict) and boundary management describes a family's unique strategies employed to regulate the emotional lives of its members (Minuchin, 1974; Hoffman, 1981).

Family therapy literature refers to boundaries in terms of a range from disengaged to enmeshed (Minuchin, 1974; Hoffman, 1981). The disengaged family has a relative absence of strong emotional connections. Relationship ties between family members are weak or nonexistent. The enmeshed family, by contrast, resembles an error-activated system with high resonance between its members (Hoffman, 1981). Emotional events or indiscretions can readily trigger the over involvement of other family members, due to highly permeable boundaries, and can often result in stress and dysfunction (Minuchin, 1974; Kretchmar & Jacobvitz, 2002).

Rationale

This study also stems from numerous components that have been linked to failed social support such as social undermining or enmeshment. According to Vinokur and van Ryn (1933), social undermining consists of behaviors that include negative affect, negative evaluation of a person's attributes, actions or efforts, and behaviors that inhibit instrumental goals (Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993). They go on to say that the same person who is in the position to support the recipient, especially in lasting social relationships, can most readily engage in social undermining.

Another example of failed support is enmeshment. The simultaneous presence of high FSS and elevated FI might suggest significant attempts at support but with failed outcomes. For example, based on research of enmeshed or over-involved families, that tend to be preoccupied with their children's difficulties, patterns of unhealthy support were found (Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001; Cox & Paley, 1997; Emery, 1989; Minuchin, 1974). The connection between the enmeshed configuration and family intrusiveness stems from the emotional coaxing and inappropriate involvement reported in such enmeshed and maladjusted families (Coyne, Downey & Boergers, 1992; Davies & Forman, 2002; Davies, Cummings & Winter, 2004). This type of behavior is largely possible due to poor boundary regulation.

Enmeshed family systems boundaries are poor and unhealthy interpersonal transactions, which occur due to intrusiveness, lack of intimacy, and heightened conflict (Thomas & Olson, 1994; Minuchin, 1974). Families with diffuse emotional boundaries give the appearance of support because they traffic primarily in positive emotion. Family members have learned to avoid conflict as a coping mechanism to minimize the stress associated with negative emotion. No emotion is well regulated, and therefore, control of

negative emotion is achieved by avoiding uncomfortable negative feelings. Instead, these families prefer positive and comfortable emotions because they inevitably go uninhibited by porous interpersonal boundaries. This façade of closeness in the families is often punctuated by heightened conflict and subsequent withdrawal before issues are resolved (Minuchin, Rosman & Baker 1978; Latzer & Gaber, 1998). These problems of communication are manifested in various ways. For example, enmeshed families often draw children into family problems, amplifying the impact that marital conflict has on a child's sense of security. In turn, prolonged difficulties in preserving security in the marital subsystem are thought to increase children's risk for maladjustment (Coyne, Downey, & Boergers, 1992; Davies & Forman, 2002; Minuchin, 1974). By extension, interactions intended to be supportive via positive emotion may be intrusive and therefore unhealthy.

In contrast, Olson's (2000) dimension of cohesion relies on the premise that healthy emotional boundaries facilitate appropriate communication. Cohesive family systems maintain balanced boundaries and are characterized by clear, warm, affectionate, flexible, and harmonious communication. Cohesive patterns are associated with better psychological well-being while enmeshed and disengaged patterns indicate unhealthy family interactions (Manzi, Vignoles, Regalia & Scabini, 2006; Davies, et. al., 2004). It is our contention that cohesive families would be more likely to exhibit a negative PSS-FI relationship whereas non-cohesive families would show a positive relationship.

The strength and direction of the relationship between FSS and FI will be examined. The hypothesis is that FSS and FI will correlate in a negative direction.

Method

Participants

Seventy-eight female student participants were randomly selected from four undergraduate classes offered at a large Midwestern university. Classes were selected based on instructor willingness to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary although participants received class credit for taking part. The great majority of students in the classes chose to take part. Participants asked to read and sign a consent form. Eleven cases were dropped from the study answers. The result was a total of 67 valid protocols. The average age of the participants was 21.54 (range: 18-25; SD = 1.56; Median = 21) and the racial composition of included: 92.3% Caucasians, 4.6% African-Americans, 1.5% Hispanics, and 1.5% checked the "other" category. The sample consisted of 1.4% freshmen, 12.9% sophomores, 35.7% juniors, 48.6% seniors, and 1.4% graduate students.

Measures

The *Perceived Social Support Scale – Family* (PSS-FA) is a 20-item questionnaire scored on a scale with three options: "yes," "no," or "don't know" for each item. The items were developed to represent different ways in which family members might be involved in the lives of adolescents and young adults. The PSS-FA is a family support measure that indicates social support by assessing the verbal and behavioral expression of intimacy tolerance where higher social support indicates a greater ability to accept intimacy. Participants were asked to indicate if their family members say or do things such as, "Family members tell me how I should use my time and energy." Low levels of

perceived family support result from a greater frequency of "no" and "don't know" responses. Low scores indicate the perception of less social support from the family while higher scores indicate more social support. For each item, the response indicative of perceived social support was scored as +1 with the other two scores being 0, resulting in a range of continuous data from 0 to 20. The Perceived Social Support scale was found to possess both high test-retest reliability (r = .83 over a 1-month interval) and internal consistency (Cronbach alpha = .90) on the preliminary version of the scale (Procidahno & Heller, 1983). Previously, a normative mean of 15.5 (SD = 5.08) has been reported for college students (Fischer & Corcoran, 1994).

The *Family Intrusiveness Scale* (FIS) is a 13-item questionnaire that assesses family communication in terms of distance regulation and system tolerance for individuality (Gavazzi, Anderson & Sabatelli, 1993). Each response is placed upon a five-point Likert Scale where 1 represents "Never" and 5 indicates "Always." Scores provide continuous data that ranges from 13-65. Items reflect family involvement in various domains such as decision-making, extra-familial ties, as well as global qualities of involvement. For example, "Family members give me unsolicited advice when I am involved in making decisions about my life," is a question regarding personal decision-making. An extra-familial ties question is, "Family members question my loyalty to the family." An example of a global question is, "Family members criticize the way I run my life." Higher scores indicate higher levels of family members' non-legitimate involvement in the adolescent/young adult's life. In other words, a score of 5 indicates that parents are overly involved in their child's life in an unhealthy way. In that case, the family has constructed a style of distance regulation that suggests an over involved or enmeshed system of boundaries. A response of 1 indicates the polar opposite, a family which is detached and uninvolved. In previous studies the FIS has shown internal consistency, using Cronbach's alpha (1951) to establish reliability, with findings of .91, .88, and .89. Construct validity ranges from .49 - .76 according to factor analysis (Gavazzi, Reese, & Sabatelli, 1998).

Results

PSS-FA had a mean score of 15.87, SD=3.53, and a range of 6-20. Half of the scores fell between 18 and 20 out of a possible high score of 20. The FIS mean score was 24.99, SD=6.3, with a range of 13-42 out of a possible high score of 65. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated at an alpha level of .05 to assess the relationship between FSS from the family and FI. Perceived social support from the family was significantly and inversely related to family intrusiveness, $F(1, 67) = -.261, p < .05$, supporting the hypothesis.

Discussion

This exploratory study suggests that FSS-FI relationship is inverse as opposed to positively correlated, and that when higher levels of FSS are reported FI decreases. Conversely, when higher levels of FI are reported, FSS is less prevalent. No conclusions can be drawn about the possibility of dysfunctional support from these results.

What can be discussed is that these young women with higher PSS exhibit stronger regulation of emotional boundaries, suggesting intrusive behavior is both successfully managed and diminished as levels of family support increase. This is consistent with the family systems literature which shows that successful promotion of intimacy is associated with minimized conflict and the communication lower instances of FI (Bartle-Haring &

Gavazzi, 1996; Gavazzi, 1993, 1994). Thus, the present study supports the belief that when familial social support is adequate the individual's need for support, information, and feedback are fulfilled by maintaining boundaries that restrict intrusive interactions (Caplan, 1974; Procidano, 1978 & 1983).

Limitations

Exploring the FSS-FI relationship presented the possibility of empirical support for a positively correlated relationship, i.e. the simultaneous presence of social support and intrusiveness from the family. Previous research on enmeshed family systems suggested the possibility that a façade of support could mask intrusive interactions (Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978; Latzer & Gaber, 1998) as did the literature regarding social undermining. Clearly, it was not the case in this investigation. Such a pattern, or so-called dysfunctional support, consist of simultaneously high PSS/FI could exist but its confirmation will probably not hail from the use of the PSS-Fa and FIS instruments, at least not with the type of sample and methodology presented here. Based on negatively correlated FSS-FI relationship the combined use of these instruments does not appear to be sensitive to family patterns of social undermining, failed support, or enmeshment.

The current investigation's small sample size and the homogeneity of its participants restrict the ability to generalize. The participants in this study were a high functioning group of college students with relatively strong perceptions of social support and low instances of family intrusiveness. The current finding might be expected in such a sample.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that PSS and FI are inversely related in a sample of young adult women. This suggests that families which successfully provide support and effective interpersonal communication via feedback also regulate internal boundaries and manage conflict in a healthier manner. The data adds perspective to the importance of both perceived social support from the family and family intrusiveness while suggesting parameters for future research regarding family processes.

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