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Running Head: Stress and help-seeking

Stressful Events and Psychological Distress among Chinese College Students in
Taiwan: Role of Help-seeking

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Abstract

Although researchers have generally agreed that help-seeking is an effective coping strategy to deal with stress, there is little research on the effectiveness of help-seeking in moderating the harmful effects of stress on psychological symptoms. The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of informal (seeking help from friends and family) and formal help-seeking in the relationship between stressful events and psychological distress among Chinese college students in Taiwan. The current sample consisted of 649 students who reported that they had experienced a stressful event in the previous month. A striking result from the current study was that formal help-seeking alleviated neither anxiety nor depressive symptoms among Chinese students, while seeking help from friends heightened anxiety symptoms for females and amplified depressive symptoms among all students in time of stress. Only seeking help from family significantly lowered the likelihood of depressive symptoms with or without stressful events.

Keywords: help-seeking, stress, depression, anxiety, Chinese college students

Stressful Events and Psychological Distress among Chinese College Students in Taiwan: Role of Help-seeking

For many students, the transition from high school to college is filled with stress. Leaving home for the first time, rigorous demands of college life and the development of self-identity are just one of the few challenges posed by the new life (for a review see Robotham & Julian, 2006). As a result, adjusting to college life may be particularly stressful for college newcomers. Stressful events experienced during transition to college life may contribute to the development of psychological distress, and thus disrupting positive adaptation (Bouteyre, Maurel, & Bernaud, 2006; Dyson & Renk, 2006). Further, stressful events may set in motion of a self-perpetuating cycle in which stress and psychological symptoms contribute to each other (e.g., Kraaij, Garnefski, de Wilde et al., 2003; Morrison & O'Connor, 2005; Printz, Shermis, & Webb, 1999; Seiffge-Krenke, 2000). Studies have shown that stressful events increase in psychological symptoms even after controlling for initial levels of maladjustment (Murberg & Bru, 2005; Printz et al.; Seiffge-Krenke). Similar to Western findings, recent Chinese research also reveal that stressful events are predictive of psychological symptoms for Chinese adolescents (e.g., Cheng, 1997; Jose & Huntsinger, 2005). However, the proportion of variance in psychological distress explained by stressful events has been typically modest (Kraaij, et al., 2003;

Printz, et al., 1999; Seiffge-Krenke, 2000). Researchers have endeavored to seek explanations for the significant but small relationship between stress and psychological symptoms (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). One of the best researched variables is coping. Previous studies across geographic boundaries have shown that the process may be influenced by the individual's ability to cope with stress (Compas et al.; Jose & Huntsinger; Liu, Tein, & Zhao, 2004; Murberg & Bru; Printz, et al.; Seiffge-Krenke).

Seeking help and advice in times of stress is one type of problem-focused coping strategy, which involves cognitive and behavioral efforts aimed to master, tolerate, or reduce those demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the individual (Rickwood, 1995). Over the past few decades, there has been a proliferation of studies on help-seeking in coping with psychological problems (e.g., Boey, 1999; Chang, 2008; Furr, Westefeld, McConnell, & Jenkins, 2001; Morgan, Ness, & Robinson, 2003; Oliver, Reed, Katz, & Haugh, 1999; Yeh, 2002). Although no clear consensus exists in the literature, it is generally agreed that help-seeking is beneficial for ameliorating the harmful effects of stress. Nevertheless, reports of how frequently a student seeks help do not inform us how effective help-seeking is in moderating the harmful effects of stress on psychological symptoms. Very few studies

thus far have directly examined the effectiveness of help-seeking behavior that young people employ to cope with stress. An important extension of prior research is to obtain empirical information that examines the effect of help-seeking on psychological distress in relation to stress.

Help can generally be sought from informal sources such as friends and family or from formal helpers such as mental health professionals. In terms of informal help-seeking, literature showed that social support from friends and family exert both a direct effect on psychological distress and a buffering effect that reduces the harmful effects of stress on psychological symptoms (e.g., Bouteyre, Maurel, & Bernaud, 2006; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Printz, et al., 1999; Seiffge-Krenke, 2000; Wodka & Barakat, 2007). Specifically, previous studies demonstrated that, since adolescence, friends have become a salient source of support in times of stress (Liu, 2002; Ystgaard, Tambs, & Dalgard, 1999). Ystgaard and colleagues reported that stressful events had a significantly stronger effect when peer support was low. Friends offer companionship, a feeling of belonging, and a sense of worth which may help students cope with stress. Even though family relationships undergo significant changes during adolescence, family continues to play an important role in many students' lives (Demaray, Malecki, Davidson, Hodgson & Rebus, 2005; Murberg & Bru, 2005; Wodka & Barakat, 2007). Murberg & Bru (2005) found that seeking parental support served as a negative

predictor of depression. Their results suggest that family may be valuable in offering advice, teaching skills and material aid in time of stress. Even though these findings seem to concur that support from friends and family helps to buffer the impact of stressful events as it provides the emotional support as well as the instrumental assistance needed to minimize the deleterious effects of stressful events, it remains unclear whether the buffering effect extends to actual help-seeking behavior in times of stress. For example, some research has found that actively seeking help from friends and family may not effectively alleviate adolescents' psychological distress (Printz et al., 1999; Rickwood, 1995; Yang & Yeh, 2006). For example, Printz and colleagues found that the support from friends and family members were not powerful enough to reduce the negative effect of stress. Therefore,

In terms of formal help-seeking, previous research indicates that counseling services may have a beneficial effect on college students' adjustment. Early studies suggested that students who had sought counseling demonstrated better social and emotional adjustment when compared with non-counseled students (for a review see Rickwood, 1995). More recently, research evidence shows that counseling services are effective in assisting student adjustment to college (DeStefano, Mellott, & Petersen, 2001; Schwitzer, Grogan, Kaddoura, & Ochoa, 1993). DeStefano and colleagues found that college students who received counseling were affected

positively by this experience, particularly in the areas of personal, social and academic adjustments. However, few studies thus far have examined the effect of professional help-seeking in coping with stress. Rickwood, for example, found that seeking professional help, including a variety of different professional helpers, did not reduce psychological distress. It remains unclear whether seeking help from professional helpers helps reducing the effect of stress on psychological symptoms.

Very little research concentrates on the effects of help-seeking for youth outside Western cultures. Leong and Lau (2001) contend that certain forms of help-seeking may create potential area of dissonance for Asians with collectivistic values. Owing to the cultural values that emphasize emotional restraint, self-reliance, strong family ties, and avoidance of shame, most Asians, including Chinese, typically prefer to keep personal problems within the family. Open and intimate communication of personal problems with outsiders may induce feelings of shame and discomfort. Indeed, research conducted in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and North America suggests that most Chinese students try to resolve psychological difficulties on their own before seeking help from others. When they do seek help, it is mostly from social network and mental health services are often viewed as the last resort when they exhaust all other resources (Boey, 1999; Chang, 2008).

The primary purpose of the current study is to explore both the direct and

buffering effects of help-seeking (i.e., friends, family, formal helpers) on the relationship between stressful events and psychological distress among Chinese college students in Taiwan. The present study contributes to unresolved issues pertaining to whether help-seeking is effective in moderating the relationship between stress and emotional distress. Despite convincing evidence that stressful events are associated with psychological distress, the various links between stressful events and psychological symptoms remain unclear. A better understanding of the influence of help-seeking could be useful in the development of prevention and intervention programs for students with Chinese origins in facing with stressful experiences.

Additionally, this study differs from previous work on a number of important dimensions: First, unlike many studies that documented students' typical stressors, this study examined a specific stressful event that students experienced and the help-seeking behaviors they employed to cope with the event. Although a standard approach of checklist of stressors may yield useful information, specific information regarding their help-seeking behaviors may be missed. In addition, instead of reporting the help-seeking behavior that Chinese students employ to cope with stress, this study directly examined the effect of help-seeking behavior in the relationship between stressful event and psychological distress. This design may help to clarify the effectiveness of help-seeking in buffering the deleterious effect of stressful events on

psychological well-being.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The original sample consisted of 1,055 first-year Chinese college students who voluntarily participated in the mental health survey at Nan Hua University in Taiwan.

The participants completed the Chinese Beck Depression Inventory-II along with other psychological instruments in the fall of 2005. The current study sampled 649 students who reported that they had experienced a stressful event in the previous month. Of the 649 students, 312 (48.1%) were male and 337 (51.9%) were female.

Mean age for this sample was 18.80 ($SD = 2.09$) years of age, ranging from 17 to 44 years of age.

Instruments

Survey of Help Seeking for a Stressful Event. This survey examined Chinese college students' help-seeking behavior for a stressful event. The first section of the survey included questions covering demographic factors, including age, gender, majors, and student status (traditional vs. nontraditional). The students were then asked if they had sought counseling in the past. The second section of the survey examined students' help-seeking behaviors. The students were asked to write down in their own words a stressful event that had troubled them in the past month. They were then asked to rate

the perceived stress caused by the event, ranging from minimally stressed (1) to severely stressed (4). To determine from whom the students sought help for their problems, 10 sources of help were listed. These 10 sources of help were classified into 3 categories: (a) friends, (b) family, including father, mother, siblings, and relatives, and (c) professional helpers, including teachers, counselors, doctors, community mental health professionals, and religious support. Participants were asked, “To whom did you talk about your problem? Check all that apply.”

Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). The BDI-II is a 21-item self-report instrument that assesses the presence and severity of depressive symptoms. The time frame for its assessment is the previous 2 weeks. Each BDI-II item is rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 (*least severe*) to 3 (*highly severe*). A total score is calculated to reflect severity of depressive symptoms, with summary scores ranging from 0 to 63. The BDI-II scale has been used extensively with college students (e.g., Beck et al.) and has demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties with Chinese college students (Chang, 2005). The Chinese BDI-II has an internal consistency coefficient of .87 with the current sample.

Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck & Steer, 1990). The BAI is a 21-item self-report inventory for measuring the presence and severity of anxiety (Beck & Steer). The time frame for its assessment is for the “past week, including today.” Each BAI item

is rated on a 4-point scale: 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*severely, I could barely stand it*). A total score is calculated to reflect the severity of anxiety symptoms, with summary scores ranging from 0 to 63. The Chinese BAI shows a high internal consistency coefficient of .89 for the current sample.

Results

Prior to conducting the main analyses, a one-way analysis of variance on gender (ANOVA) was performed to determine whether the participants differed by gender in relation to the severity of the stressful event, depression and anxiety scores. The ANOVA produced significant a main effect for gender on anxiety symptoms, $F(1, 647) = 5.93, p = 0.02$. Chinese female students ($M = 8.95, SD = 7.05$) were significantly more anxious than male students ($M = 7.61, SD = 7.15$). Since there was significant gender difference in anxiety scores, the data were analyzed separately for female and males students for anxiety symptoms. As there was no gender difference in depressive symptoms, the data were analyzed as a whole for depressive symptoms.

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the study's hypotheses that help-seeking from friends, family and professional helpers would exert direct and moderating effects on the relationship between stressful event and psychological distress among Chinese college students. The criteria variables in the analyses were the BAI and the BDI-II scores. The predictor variables for the analyses

were stressful event, seeking help from friends, family, and professional helpers, as well as interaction variables (i.e., stress \times friend, stress \times family, stress \times professional helpers). In the hierarchical regression equation, the stressful event scores were entered first, followed by help-seeking from friends, family, and professional helpers, and then the interaction variables.

Moderating effect of help-seeking in the relationship between stressful events and anxiety symptoms

Results of the hierarchical regression analysis predicting the BAI scores for male students were presented in Table 1. In step 1, stressful events made a significant contribution to the prediction of anxiety, $F(1, 310) = 7.85, p < 0.01, R^2 = 0.05$. The data revealed that higher severity of the stressful event was significantly positively predictive of Chinese male students' BAI scores, $\beta = 0.16, t = 2.80, p < 0.01$. After accounting for the variance in the BAI scores, seeking help from friends, family and professional helpers added significant contribution to the prediction, $F \text{ change}(3, 307) = 2.12, p < 0.05, R^2 \text{ change} = 0.02$. Seeking help from friends was positively correlated with BAI scores among Chinese males students, $\beta = 0.12, t = 2.07, p < 0.05$. After accounting for the aforementioned predictor variables, the interaction variables as a set also did not add significant contribution to the prediction, $F \text{ change}(3, 304) = 0.81, p > 0.05, R^2 \text{ change} = 0.01$.

For Chinese female students, results of the hierarchical regression analysis predicting the BAI scores were presented in Table 1. In step 1, stressful events made a significant contribution to the prediction of anxiety, $F(1, 335) = 20.05, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.06$. Specifically, higher severity of the stressful event was significantly positively predictive of Chinese female students' BAI scores, $\beta = 0.24, t = 4.48, p < 0.001$. After accounting for the variance in the BAI scores, seeking help from friends, family and professional helpers did not add significant contribution to the prediction, F change (3, 332) = 1.73, $p > 0.05, R^2$ change = 0.02. However, seeking help from family was negatively correlated with BAI scores, $\beta = -0.12, t = -2.24, p = 0.03$. After accounting for the aforementioned predictor variables, the interaction variables as a set contributed significant variance to the prediction of the BAI scores, F change (3, 329) = 2.94, $p = 0.03, R^2$ change = 0.03. The interaction between stressful event and seeking help from friends was significantly positively correlated with the BAI scores, $\beta = 0.33, t = 2.14, p = 0.03$. Meanwhile, the interaction between stressful event and seeking help from family was significantly negatively correlated with the BAI scores, $\beta = -0.32, t = -2.13, p = 0.03$. (see Table 1)

Insert Table 1 Here

To examine the meaning of the significant interactions into more details, the female sample was divided into two subgroups: (1) those who sought help from

friends and family, and (2) those who did not. For each group the Pearson correlation between stressful event and the BAI scores was computed (see Table 2). With regard to seeking help from friends, the results showed that a stronger relationship between the degree of stressful events and the BAI scores existed for those female students who sought help from friends. Meanwhile, a weaker relationship was found between a stressful event and the BAI scores for the females who sought help from family members.

Insert Table 2 Here

Moderating effect of help-seeking in the relationship between stressful events and depressive symptoms

As there was no gender difference in depressive symptoms, the data were analyzed as a whole for depressive symptoms. Results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis for the BDI-II scores are presented in Table 1. In step 1, stressful events made a significant contribution to the prediction of depressive symptoms, $F(1, 647) = 48.69, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.07$. Specifically, higher severity of the stressful event was significantly positively predictive of Chinese students' BDI-II scores, $\beta = 0.27, t = 6.98, p < 0.001$. After accounting for the variance in the BDI-II scores, seeking help from friends, family, and professional helpers together added marginal contribution to the prediction, R^2 change = 0.02, $F(3, 644)$ change = 2.24, $p = 0.08$, with only seeking

help from family making a unique negative contribution, $\beta = -0.10$, $t = -2.40$, $p = 0.02$.

That is, Chinese student who sought help from family members were more likely to present lower level of depressive symptoms. After accounting for the aforementioned predictor variables, the interaction variables as a set did not make significant

contribution to the prediction of the BDI-II scores, R^2 change = 0.01, $F(3, 641)$

change = 2.23, $p = 0.08$. However, the interaction between stressful event and seeking

help from friends was significantly positively correlated with the BDI-II scores, $\beta =$

0.28, $t = 2.58$, $p = 0.01$. (see Table 1) To examine the meaning of the significant

interaction into more details, the sample was divided into two subgroups: (1) those

who sought help from friends, and (2) those who did not seek help from friends. For

each group the Pearson correlation between stressful event and the BDI-II scores was

computed (see Table 3). This finding showed that a stronger relationship between the

degree of stressful events and the BDI-II scores existed for those who sought help

from friends.

Insert Table 3 Here

Discussion

Although it has been acknowledged that help-seeking plays an important role in coping with stress, there has been very little research examining the effect of help-seeking in moderating the effect of stressful events on psychological well-being.

The present study was designed to investigate the roles of help-seeking in the development of psychological distress in relation to stressful events. It was hypothesized that seeking help from friends, family, and professional helpers would moderate the relationship between stressful events and psychological distress. The current regression data partially support the hypothesis. According to the current data, stressful events that confronted Chinese students upon entering college predicted considerable anxiety and depressive symptoms. This result not only confirmed previous findings that stressful events are predictive of increase in psychological distress but the transition upon entering college could be taxing for college newcomers (Cheng, 1997; Jose & Huntsinger, 2005; Murberg & Bru, 2005; Printz et al., 1999; Seiffge-Krenke, 2000). Meanwhile, the moderating effect of help-seeking on psychological distress in relation to stressful events varied by gender and helping resources. Firstly, the results suggest that while neither informal nor formal help-seeking significantly alleviated anxiety symptoms among Chinese male students in the face of stressful events, seeking help from friends and family significantly moderated the relationship between stressful events and anxiety for female students. This finding supports previous contentions that females are more likely to be influenced by their social relations. However, the interaction results showed that seeking help from friends and family exerted different effect on the strength of

stressful events on anxiety among Chinese female students. The Chinese females who sought help from friends for a stressful event reported elevated anxiety symptoms, while seeking help from family members reported reduced anxiety symptoms. This finding is consistent with Rickwood's assertion that support offered by friends through sharing one's problems and reciprocal listening may not only keep the focus on the self and the problems but reinforce each other's difficulties (Rickwood, 1995). Rickwood suggested that sharing a problem and concentrating on all its possible ramifications may amplify distress and thus increase rather than decrease emotional arousal. As a result, sharing a problem with friends may result in greater distress.

The regression data concerning depressive symptoms indicated that seeking help from help from family not only predicted lower level of depressive symptoms but effectively reduced the negative effect of stressful event on depressive symptoms. This result suggests that Chinese students with a strong family support seemed to be more resistant to depression in the face of adverse life events than those without. Meanwhile, the interaction between a stressful event and seeking help from friends was positively predictive of depressive symptoms. This finding suggests that seeking help from friends was ineffective in alleviating depressive symptoms when coping with a stressful event for Chinese students.

On the basis of present results, it seems that further investigations into the

effectiveness of help-seeking are sorely needed. Even though help-seeking has been regarded as adaptive in combating the harmful effects of stress, the current results indicated otherwise. The present study showed that stress-related distress was not blunted by seeking help from friends and professional helpers. Specifically, contrary to popular belief that friends serve as a salient source of support for adolescents, this result indicated that seeking help from friends may exacerbate the problems faced by Chinese students in their adaptation to college. These findings are certainly intriguing and warrant further investigation.

Although the findings from the current study may add to the knowledge of college student stress and coping, and students with Chinese origins in particular, they need to be interpreted within the limitations of the study's design. It is important to note that the correlational nature of this study's design, causality cannot be assumed regarding the significant relations found between predicting and criterion variables. Additionally, this study had a cross-sectional design. As a result, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the causality or temporal order of the variables. Longitudinal studies are needed in order to solve these cause and effect issues. Further, as this sample consists of only Chinese college students in Taiwan, caution should be exercised when generalizing the current findings to the general population until these findings have been replicated across demographic and geographical boundaries.

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Table 1 Moderated Regression Analysis of Stressful Events and Help-seeking on

Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms

Predictors		BAI				BDI-II	
		male		female		β	t
		β	t	β	t	β	t
Step 1	Stressful Event	0.31	6.99***	0.33	7.73***	0.35	11.58***
Step 2	Stressful Event	0.29	6.38***	0.33	7.73***	0.35	11.57***
	Friend	0.08	1.63	0.01	0.32	0.01	0.25
	Family	-0.06	-1.30	-0.08	-1.87	-0.08	-2.46*
	Professional	0.08	1.76	-0.01	-0.23	-0.03	-1.04
Step 3	Stressful Event	0.23	3.00**	0.30	3.30**	0.27	4.80***
	Friend	-0.01	-0.14	-0.08	-1.35	-0.07	-1.61
	Family	0.01	0.10	0.05	0.84	-0.04	-0.81
	Professional	0.06	0.77	-0.08	-1.06	-0.04	-0.77
	Stressful Event	0.15	1.68	0.21	2.20*	0.16	2.47*
	× Friend						
	Stressful Event	-0.09	-1.20	-0.23	-2.76**	-0.06	-1.00
	× Family						
Stressful Event	0.04	0.45	0.09	1.13	0.02	0.28	
× Professional							

Table 2 Pearson Correlations Between Stressful Events and BAI scores for Chinesestudents Seeking Help from Friends and Family

	Friends		Family	
	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>
Yes	467	0.28***	330	0.19**
No	252	0.11	389	0.32***

Table 3 Pearson Correlations Between Stressful Events and BDI-II scores for Chinesestudents Seeking Help from Friends

	Friends	
	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>
Yes	467	0.34***
No	252	0.11*