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Research Paper

By: Greg Bolan

Title: Using level of social support as a predictor of assistance acceptance.

Running Head: Assistance Acceptance

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Abstract

The present experiment examined in an experimental setting whether or not manipulating the availability of assistance could alter the assistance requested by subjects high or low in perceived social support (P.S.S). Forty-Five introductory psychology students completed an in-class questionnaire which measured perceived social support (P.S.S), and which was used to separate subjects into high and low P.S.S. groups. Subjects also attended a second experimental session which measured amount of assistance requested by subjects, when help was easy or hard to get. The results show no significant interaction of P.S.S level x assistance availability, raising the possibility that when subjects in both P.S.S. conditions recognized there was help available, they behaved the same. There are differences in the satisfaction subjects expressed with the experiment and the amount of help subjects thought they had received based upon P.S.S. level which is in partial agreement with earlier studies. A examination of possible future research, in experimental settings is explored.

Introduction:

It has been apparent for a number of years, that stress can have a detrimental effect on the health of individuals exposed to it for long periods of time. Some of the problems associated with stress include back and bowel problems, headaches and stomach ulcers (Schreiber & Seitzinger, 1985). These physical and mental consequences of stress have generated much research into how people deal with stress, and why stress seems to affect some people more than others. Some of this research examines both the personal and environmental factors which contribute to stress resistance.

The concept of Social Support, or the friends, family, and physical and monetary resources that one can bring to bear in times of stress, is an approach to stress research that is very interested in how people with differing amounts of help available respond to stress. The concept states, essentially, that an individual with a high level of social support, say a financially well off educated individual with many friends and good family ties, will be less affected by stress than a individual with a low level of social

support, say a destitute widowed bag person. In the above scenario we might expect that the stressor of a $500.00 court fine would effect the high social support individual less than the low social support individual.

There is a significant body of research which has explored the relationship between social support level and physical and mental well being. This research has demonstrated a significant correlation between social support and physical and mental well being, such that individuals who are high in social support appear to be healthier and more immune to the negative effects of stress than individuals low in social support (eg. DeLongis, Folkman and Lazarus 1988; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Hobfall, Nadler and Lieberman, 1986).

The proposed reason that social support works is that the resources it provides form a buffer between the stressor and the individual. In our destitute bag person example we would expect the $500.00 fine to cause much more stress to the destitute individual than to the financially well off individual, who has greater financial resources.

Other research has examined interpersonal differences that may be related to the formation of

high and low levels of social support. These researchers examined how an individual's self-esteem or how physically attractive they are would be related to the level of perceived social support they have. Higher levels of self-esteem and physical attractiveness appear to be correlated with higher levels of perceived social support (P.S.S.) What this points out is that there can be differences in the populations of high/low P.S.S. which may play a role in how the individual reacts to stress or available help.

The present experiment examines how an individual's previous experience with social support will influence their help-seeking behaviour in an experimental setting. Previous correlational research by Cohen, Clark and Sherrod (1986) examined a college freshman population to see how previous P.S.S. levels influenced new friend formation. They found that if freshmen had a high level of social support before entering college then, on average, they formed more friends than freshmen low in social support. This indicates that previous P.S.S. levels can influence the development of new social support networks, in as far as forming new friends was representative of a social support network.

Other research has shown that there are differences in the amount of help an individual receives after a stressful event based upon their perceived social support (P.S.S.) level. Cutrona (1986) examined 41 undergraduate students over a 14 day period. The experiment had the subjects keep a diary over the 14 days which assessed both the level of stress they had experienced on each day, as well as the helping behaviours they had received each day. Cutrona found that subjects who perceived themselves to be high in social support received more helping behaviours when stressed than those subjects low in perceived social support. This demonstrated that level of P.S.S. could influence the help subjects received, but it did not explore whether the subjects actively sought out that help. The question of whether subjects high in P.S.S. actually seek out available help more than those low in P.S.S. was not addressed.

The present experiment was designed to address this question in a interventive and experimental manner. Previous correlational research in the field of social support has been useful for identifying the components of social support and demonstrating that it

can help mitigate the effects of stress. However previous correlational research has not attempted a direct manipulation of any of the variables involved, which is the focus of the present research.

Hypothesis: That subjects with high levels of social support will utilize help more than those with low levels of social support when it is readily available.

Method:

Subjects

Forty-Five introductory psychology students received course credit for completing an in-class questionnaire, the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List, developed by Cohen and Hoberman (1983), which measured perceived social support levels, and which was used to separate subjects into high and low perceived social support groups. Subjects were also required to attend a second experimental session which measured the amount of assistance subjects asked for when help was either easy or hard to obtain.

When subjects came to the second experimental session they were randomly placed, based upon codename sign up sheets, to one of the 2 experimental conditions. They were then given instructions for completing a computer administered anagram task and also a post-task questionnaire designed to measure how subjects thought they had performed and how much they liked/disliked the experimental setting. (Appendix A.)

Differing the level of help was done by either having the experimenter sitting unoccupied in a non-

partitioned room, the easy help condition, or having the experimenter inform the subject that he had some work to do, and then sitting out of sight of the subject in the partitioned-off room, the hard help condition. This was the independent variable manipulation. This is shown in Figure 1.

Subjects then performed the computer-administered anagram task which allowed subjects to make one of three responses when confronted with a mixed-up word, or anagram. Subjects could attempt to solve the word themselves, skip the word and go on to a new one, or they could ask for help which summoned the experimenter with a tone. The experimenter then entered a codeword which caused the computer to provide a hint on how to solve the anagram, by providing the first letter of the word. If the subject asked for more assistance with the word the last letter of the word was also shown, and the correctly spelled word would be shown if a third hint was asked for.

The computer measured the number of times subjects asked for assistance, their perseverance, how they thought they performed, and how much they liked or disliked the experiment. The data were stored

anonymously under the subjects chosen codename. After completing the post-task questionnaire subjects were debriefed.

Results:

Subjects were separated into high and low perceived social support groups based on the subject's prior performance on the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List from session one of the experiment. The P.S.S. population was divided into thirds and the middle third was eliminated to magnify the P.S.S. effect, which left 15 subjects in each the high and low P.S.S. groups.

Based on previous correlational research which showed that subjects high in perceived social support, sought out and received more assistance in times of stress than those low in perceived social support (Cutrona, 1986), and other research which showed a higher level of friend formation in a freshman population (Cohen, Clark and Sherrod, 1986); the concept that previous social support levels could influence assistance seeking behaviour was put forth. Specifically it was hypothesized that subjects with high levels of P.S.S would utilize help more than those

with low levels of P.S.S. when it is readily available. It was further expected that subjects would differ in their satisfaction with the experiment as a function of their social support levels and experimental condition.

Neither of these hypothesis were completely confirmed by examination of the data through Analysis of Variance. Our primary hypothesis, that social support levels would predict assistance utilization was not confirmed. A examination of the group means shows the predicted trend, but does not reach significance.

There were, however, some significant effects based upon P.S.S. level.

Examining the subjects response on the experimental questionnaire it is noted that the subjects perception of how much assistance they received varied if their perceived levels of social support were high or low. Subjects who were high in social support felt they had needed very little help with the anagram task, while those low in social support felt they had needed significantly more help in the anagram task, $F(1,29) = 3.91$, $p < .05$. Figure 2.

When this is placed alongside the observation that neither group actually differed in level of help

received, or in actual performance on the task, it begins to appear that those subjects high in social support have a higher regard for their contribution to the anagram task than low P.S.S. subjects.

Performing an Analysis of Variance on the second interaction of satisfaction with the experiment, we find that there is a significant interaction only between the level of social support and satisfaction, $F(1,29) = 4.76$, $p < .036$, and that there is no interaction due to availability of help. (Figure 3.) Thus we can only conclude that those individuals who were high in levels of perceived social support reacted more favourably to the overall testing situation than those low in perceived social support.

Finally, there was also an interaction between the condition the subjects were put in and the number of incorrect responses the subjects tried. Generally those subjects in the easy help condition asked for significantly less help than those in the hard help condition, $F(1,29) = 8.27$, $p < .01$. (Figure 4.)

This finding however, does not allow generalization beyond stating that the condition subjects were placed in influenced the number of

incorrect responses. What it may point to is that the independent manipulation of partitioning the room caused subjects in both P.S.S. conditions to neglect the help option, and to instead continue to insert incorrectly-spelled words.

Finally, it is noted that the absence of a significant interaction between P.S.S. levels (high or low) and Experimental condition (Easy or Hard help), does not allow for confirmation of the primary hypothesis. A examination of the group means showed a trend in this direction, but it was not significant.

Discussion:

In the present experiment it is noted that there were significant differences in subject responses based upon P.S.S. level. Specifically, subjects high in P.S.S. responded more favourably to the overall experimental condition, and thought they had asked for less help than those low in P.S.S.. This finding is in partial agreement with some earlier findings which showed other differences in experimental populations based upon P.S.S. levels for traits such as self-esteem and attractiveness. Our finding that subjects high in

P.S.S. liked the experiment more may reflect a more positive outlook, and the finding that high P.S.S. subjects thought they asked for less help may indicate they have a greater self-confidence. The present experiment was not designed to examine this, so the operative word here is "may". A experiment would have to be specifically designed to examine either of the above observations, and all that these findings can point out is that there are indeed apparent differences between people of different P.S.S. levels.

In conclusion, it is felt that the non-significant results of the experiment may be as informative as the significant results. Although there was no P.S.S. level x Experimental Condition interaction it is not necessary to conclude that the primary hypothesis itself is wrong.

It may be that the experimental manipulation itself was too coarse, and subjects in both conditions felt that help was unavailable, or they may have felt in both conditions that help was too available. Further study, manipulating the level of assistance, may provide confirmation of the hypothesis, but there may be a more logical and intuitive explanation of why

there was no confirmation of the primary hypothesis that subjects high in P.S.S. would seek out more help than those low in P.S.S.

In the present experiment the experiment design necessitated the subject being told help with the anagram task was available to them in the experiment instructions. It may be that when subjects low in perceived social support recognize that there is assistance available to them they respond in a equivalent manner as subjects high in P.S.S.. If it is possible to increase an individual's help-seeking behaviour by demonstrating to them that help is available, the impact on social support research would be large. The various directions of research which could benefit from a examination of this possibility include health care, stress management, and perhaps even the field of education, in that children taught to recognize possible sources of help might utilize them more. Thus, a problematic home situation or a hidden learning problem might be brought to light if the child approached a source of help, such as their teacher. Advertising that help is available, to a child at school, or to a stressed adult at work might prove to

be much more valuable than later corrective interventions. If a child's nutritional problem is corrected and it increases scholastic performance, or if a stressed adult seeks professional help and avoids a nervous breakdown, the cost to society would have been reduced. Confirmation of this hypothesis would prove what we already take for a common sense truth; An ounce of prevention may well be worth a pound of cure.

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Appendix A.

Post task questionnaire measuring subject satisfaction and perceived performance on Anagram Task.

Questionnaire was administered by computer.

Mental Flexibility Measures Questionnaire:

Please complete the following questions as accurately and as honestly as possible, so as to ensure that this test will continue to be a valid and effective test.

Please complete each item by indicating to what an extent that item applies to you, by entering a number from 1 to 7 when prompted. By entering a 1 you are indicating that you agree with the item very little and by entering a 7 you are indicating that you agree with the item a great deal.

Please note that all your answers will be confidential and secret, and that your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

(Press Space Bar to Begin the Questionnaire)

1=strongly disagree 7=strongly agree

1. I expect that I performed quite well on the Mental Flexibility Measure?

2. I did not need much help in completing the Mental Flexibility Measure?

3. I expect that my score would be in the top 25% of people who take this test?

4. I felt that the experiment was an interesting one.?

5. I felt that the experiment monitor was interested in the experiment.?

6. I felt that the experiment monitor did a good job in the experiment.?

7. I felt that the experiment monitor was quite helpful.?

Figure Caption Sheet

Figure 1. Diagram of the 2 experimental conditions, the easy help and hard help rooms. This was the independent manipulation.

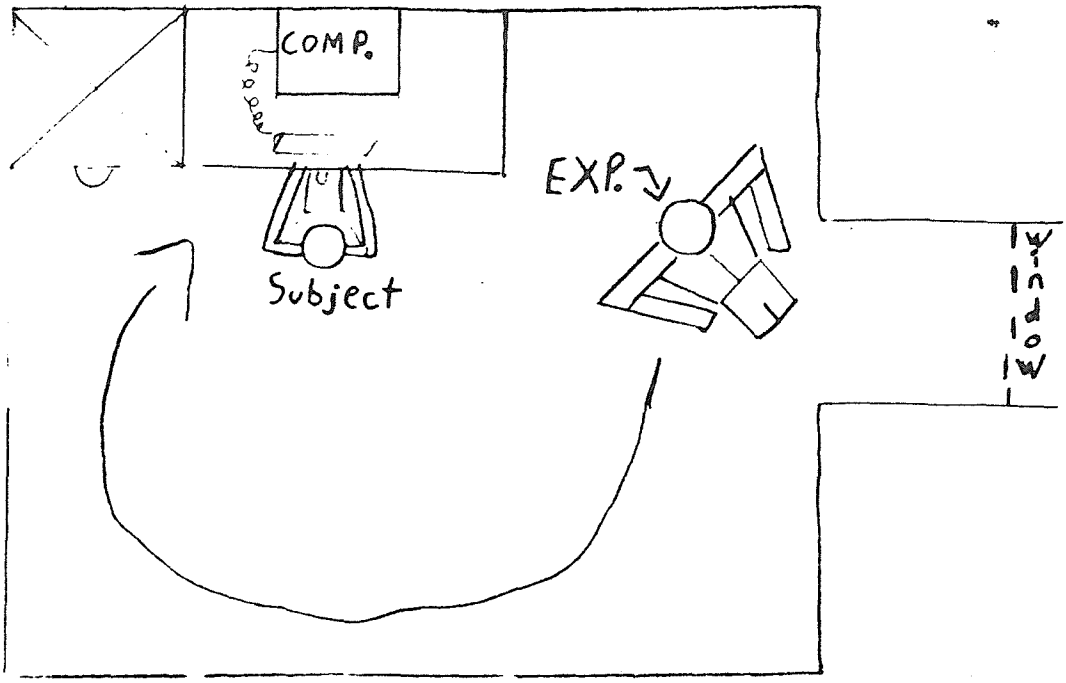
Figure 2. Bar Chart of the subjects perceived amount of assistance requested. Significant differences based on perceived social support level (high/low).

Figure 3. Bar Chart of the subjects satisfaction with the experiment setting. Significant differences based on perceived social support level (high/low).

Figure 4. Bar Chart of the number of times subjects attempted incorrect word solutions. Significant differences based on experimental condition subject was placed in.

EASY

HELP

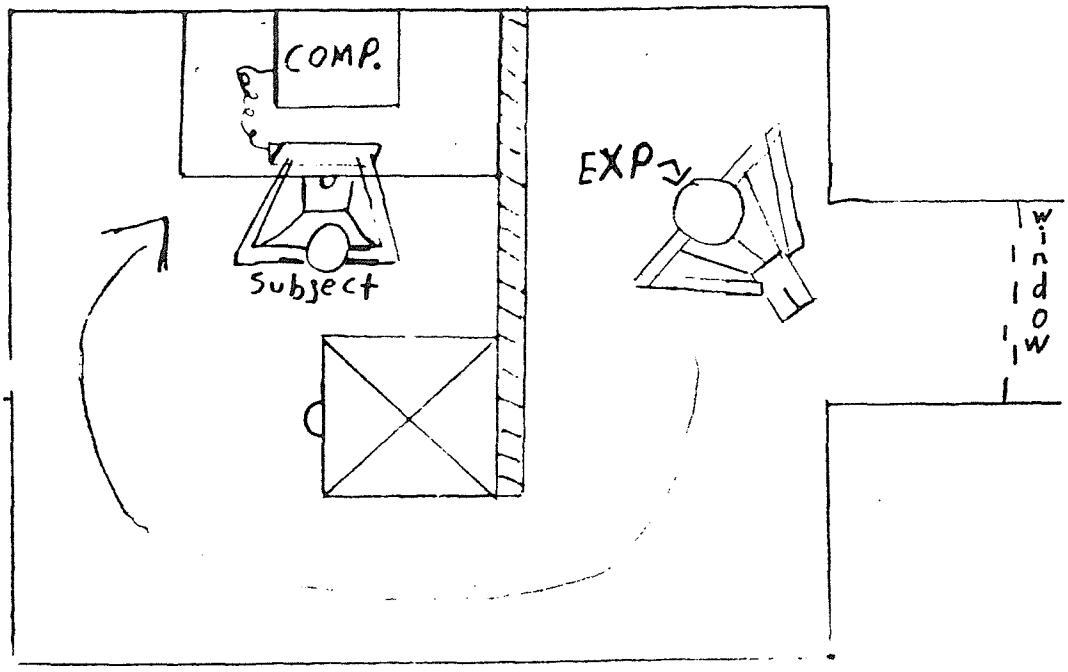


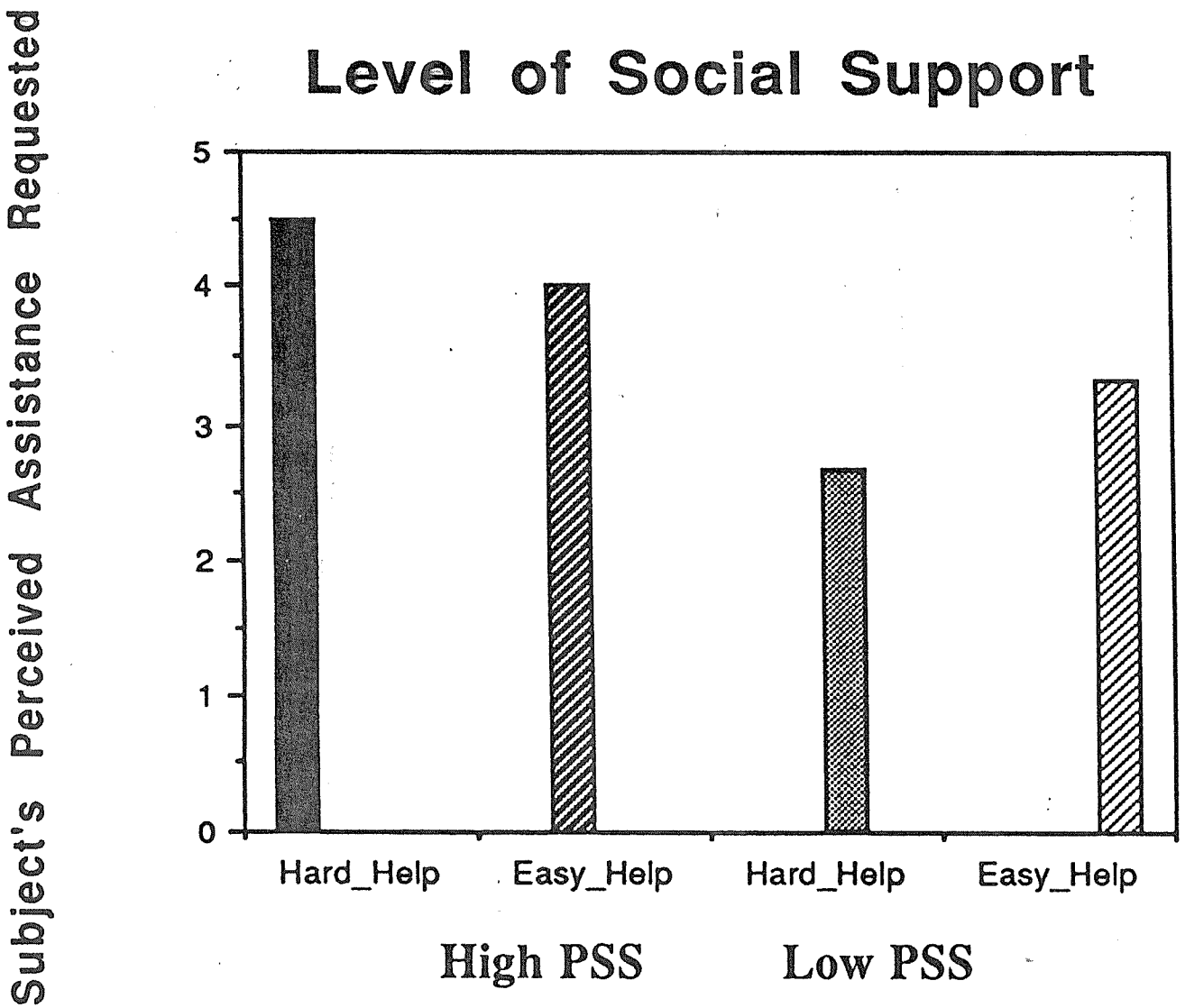
EXPERIMENTAL

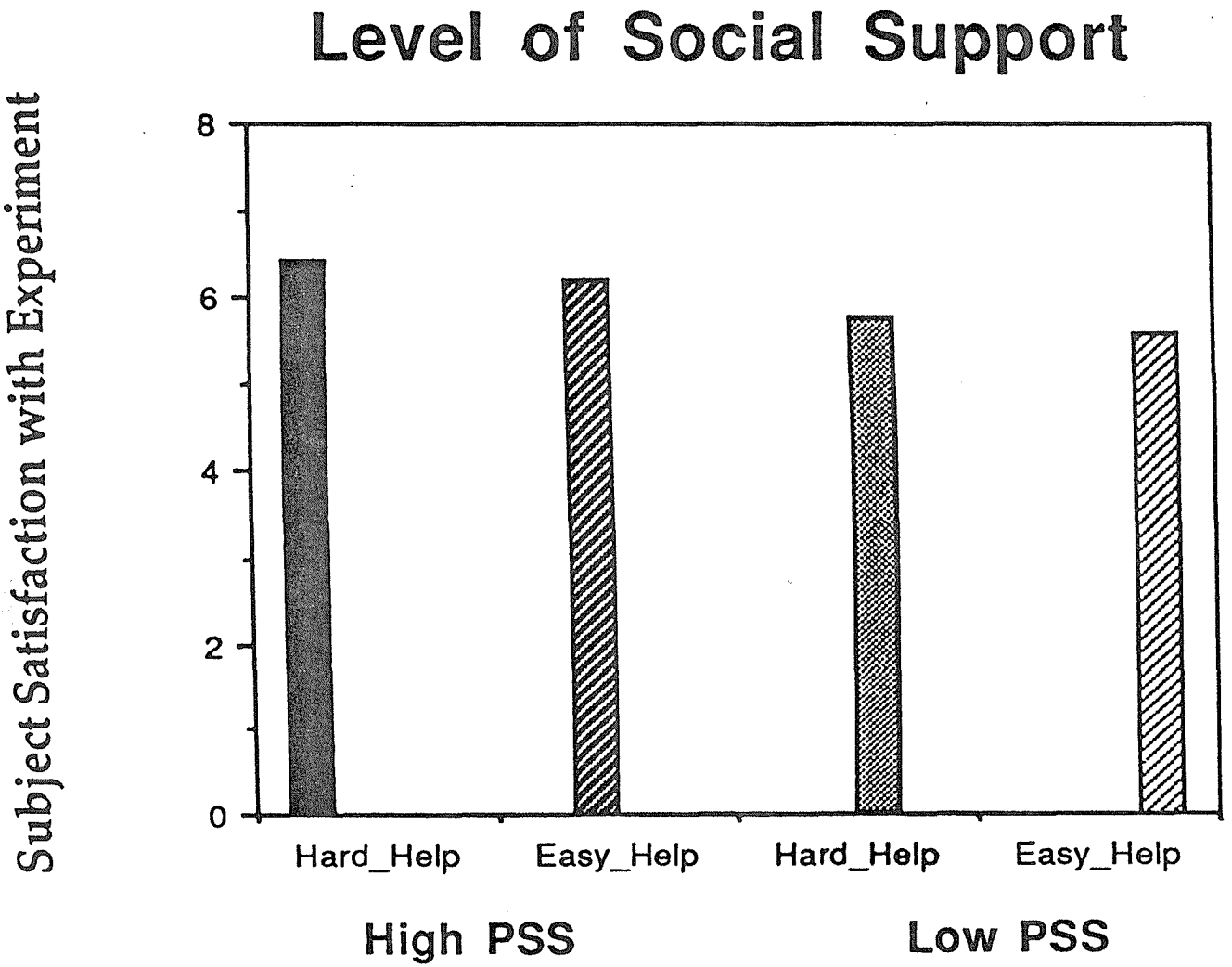
CONDITIONS

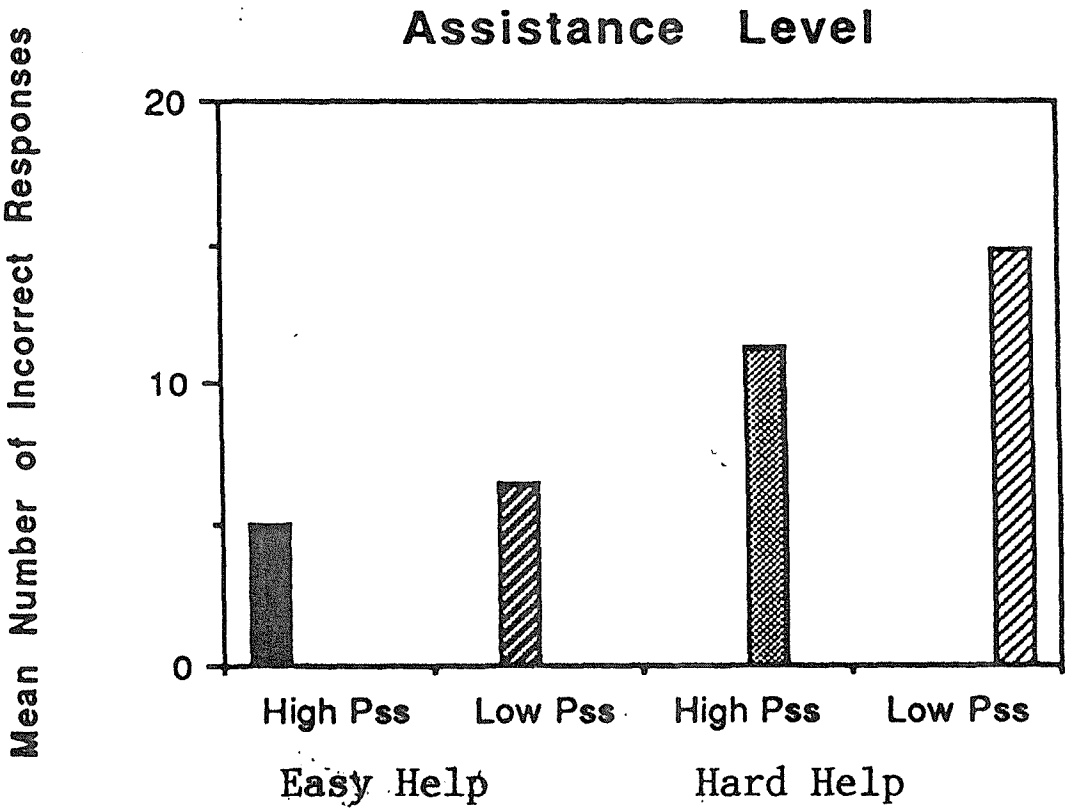
HARD

HELP




Level of Social Support
Subject's Perceived Assistance Requested
5
4
3
2
1
0
Hard_Help
Easy_Help
Hard_Help
Easy_Help
High PSS
Low PSS


Level of Social Support
Subject Satisfaction with Experiment
8
6
4
2
0
Hard_Help
Easy_Help
Hard_Help
Easy_Help
High PSS
Low PSS


Assistance Level
Mean Number of Incorrect Responses
20
10
0
High Pss
Low Pss
High Pss
Low Pss
Easy Help
Hard Help

4-5

Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review examines how the question of why some individuals seemed to suffer less from the impact of stress generated the theoretical concept of Social Support. The Social Support model has as it's primary tenet that a individuals social resources, (intimate and general relationships, family and monetary resources), can help the individual to mitigate the physical and mental damage stress can cause by allowing the individual to draw on social resources to combat stress. Correlational studies have shown a significant relationship between social support and well being, as well as demonstrating that past experience seems to have some effect on new social support development. The previous research, being correlational, has not looked at social support in a interventive experimental manner. A study which did look at social support in such a context could generate interesting insights into how social support can influence help-seeking behaviour. A specific hypothesis to provide the framework for that study is proposed.

"If not positively managed stress can cause changes in the individual's body, feelings and behaviour. The number and intensity of stress effects depend on a variety of unique factors in the individual's life such as personality and problem-solving skills. Physical symptoms of stress range from headaches, muscle tension and nausea to the stress diseases: stomach ulcers, bowel problems, back problems and high blood pressure." (Schreiber & Seitzinger, 1985, p.54).

The above brief excerpt of some of the effects that stress can have on an individual's life is used to begin a article about stress and it's impact on police officers; but it is also completely applicable to any person who suffers from the effects of continuing exposure to negative stressors. For instance, a study done by Mason and Blankenship (1987) demonstrated that stressful life events were correlated with a greater incidence of abuse, both mental and physical, in heterosexual intimate relationships. Further, a study by Fimian and Krupicka (1987) of 800 special education teachers showed that those teachers with high levels of stress were significantly more likely to seek

professional counselling help. These data would appear to support the assumption that stress can have a negative, and even damaging, impact upon many human actions and interactions.

This has caused some researchers to look for methods and interventions that can reduce either the level of stress an individual feels or to search for the systems which help certain individuals to resist the impact of stress. Some of this research has focused on direct interventions between the person and the stressor, and these would include bio-feedback, meditation, and pharmaceutical interventions. Other forms of research have taken the broader and less immediate approach of examining why a certain individual is affected by a stressor in terms of their environment. Is this stress resistance a personal or an environmental manifestation, or a combination of both?

The social support paradigm has looked at how an individual's perception of the environment and the stressor can influence response. For example, if a wealthy and a poor individual are both charged with a crime, and the fine is $1000.00 or a 6 month jail term, we might expect the wealthy individual to cope better

with this particular stressor than the poor individual who cannot pay the fine and will probably go to jail.

Conversely, if the poor individual has 4 close friends to turn to when he is depressed he might cope better than the wealthy individual who was depressed and had no close friends to turn to. In the above examples we have seen that the resources that one can bring to bear against a stressor: family, friends, physical and monetary help, can lessen or mitigate the impact that the stressor will have on the individual. This summarizes the concept of social support. "This new perspective--the 'social supports model'--suggests that traditional thinking about stress ignores the reality that stressful experiences or stressors are not the only factors operating in a person's life. Instead, it is argued that a person may be more or less insulated against the effects of stressors depending on whether the individual possesses social supports."(Cullen, Lemming, Link, and Wozniak, 1985).

Earlier research has indicated that these social support systems can help to mitigate the physical and psychological damage that can occur as a result of stress. For example, a number of studies have shown a

significant correlation between the presence of an effective social support network and the maintenance of a person's well-being as it is measured by disease resistance and psychological healthiness (e.g. DeLongis, Folkman and Lazarus, 1988;Cohen & Wills, 1985; Hobfall, Nadler and Lieberman, 1986).

Cullen, Lemming, Link & Wozniak (1985) also noted that social support systems could be a useful stress reduction tool in police stress management. In their correlational study they noted that those officers who had high levels of supervisory support reported low levels of work stress, and that those officers who had high levels of family support reported lower levels of general stress. These results are consistent with the social support paradigm.

Cohen and Wills (1985) did a comprehensive review of the relevant literature in an attempt to examine why this resistance to stress occurred. One model which they examined postulated that social support would be beneficial to a individual primarily when they were under stress and needed the resources provided by the social support network. This is called the Buffering

hypothesis due to the fact that the social support is supposed to act as a buffer or wall between the person and the stress.

The other model postulates that social support is beneficial irrespective of the level of stress the person is under and this is called the main-effect model. This model derives it's name from the significant statistical interaction of Social Support x Health when an analysis of variance is applied to the data. This model holds that higher levels of social support mean greater health, regardless of the level of stress the individual is under.

Cohen and Wills found evidence consistent with both models, noting that the buffering effect was effective when there was directly perceived social support available for the specific stressor, but further noted that either conceptualization appeared to help in mitigating the damaging results of stress.

These correlational studies have been quite useful in defining what makes up a social support system, and in demonstrating that high levels of social support are linked to better health. They have not, however, clearly demonstrated how social support works in

differing situations, or in clearly showing the mechanisms which help one individual high in social support to cope better than another individual low in social support. If one were able to get a clear glimpse at the mechanisms in play it might allow one to tell the low social support individual what they are doing wrong. Again, there has been some correlational research which has indicated some of the mechanisms at work.

For example, it has been proposed by a number of researchers that a individual can and does determine how they will react to the stress through how they perceive their environment. Schill, Ramanaiah & O'Laughlin (1984) noted that the level of anxiety an individual felt could indicate how they would react under stress, with highly anxious individuals seeking more escape responses to stress (i.e. drinking) than less anxious individuals. Other research has examined interpersonal differences that may be related to the formation of high and low levels of social support. These researchers examined how a individual's self-esteem, or how physically attractive they are would be related to the level of perceived social support they

have. Higher levels of self-esteem and physical attractiveness appear to be correlated with higher levels of perceived social support (P.S.S.). What this points out is that there can be differences in the populations of high/low P.S.S. groups which may play a role in how the individuals react to stress or available help. This type of correlational research allows the observation of the interplay of variables, but does not allow us to speak in definitive terms. Do people who are low in self-esteem feel they are not worthy of friends, family, money etc. and so shun the components that help to make up a social support network? Do low P.S.S. people have fewer friends because they are homely looking? These and other questions about the differences between social support levels cannot be answered without experimenting with the variables involved in a interventive experimental manner.

In another study Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis and Gruen (1986) showed that other personal variables may be involved. The authors found that an individual's initial appraisal of a stressful encounter was quite important in influencing the

interpretation of, and response to, a stressful encounter. What they individuals thought they saw influenced their reactions. If they perceived themselves to be in charge of a situation the situation was seen as less threatening. This data demonstrates that the perception a individual has of his/her environment can influence how he/she will react to that environment.

It has also been noted that an individual's past experience may influence future behaviour. For example, the level of social support one has at the time of entering a new and stressful social situation may influence the number of new resources one develops.

Cohen, Clark and Sherrod (1986) conducted a correlational study of a college freshman population which partially demonstrated this. They showed that those subjects who entered college with high levels of perceived social support developed more friends than those entering college low in perceived social support. This indicates that previous P.S.S. levels can influence the development of new social support networks, at least in as far as forming new friends was representative of a social support network.

Other research has shown that there are differences in the amount of help an individual receives after a stressful event based upon their perceived social support (P.S.S.) level. Cutrona (1986) examined 41 undergraduate students over a 14 day period. The experiment had the subjects keep a diary over the 14 days which assessed both the level of stress they had experienced each day, as well as the number and type of helping behaviours they had received each day. Cutrona found that subjects who perceived themselves to be high in social support received more helping behaviours when stressed than those subjects low in P.S.S.

This demonstrated that level of P.S.S. could influence the help subjects received, but it did not explore whether the subjects actively sought out that help. The question of whether subjects high in P.S.S.actually seek out available help more than those low in P.S.S. was not addressed.

One significant problem with the research that we have received so far is that the experimenters have used a correlational experimental procedure. This approach has been extremely useful in finding and identifying the general components of social support,

demonstrating that it is generally beneficial in reducing the negative impacts of stress, and in providing the impetus for new research.

The previous researchers have not, however, examined how differing levels of social support will influence help-seeking behaviour in specific settings. To do this one would have to use a interventive and experimental approach, manipulating one of a number of variables, such as social support level, help available, level of stress, etc. This need for a new approach to social support study has been noted by Cohen & Wills (1985) who stated "Future research testing the effectiveness of specific support resources to specific stressors, would help to clarify the operative mechanisms."

This then provides the rationale for examining how an individual's perceived level of social support will influence their help-seeking behaviour in a experimental setting. It is entirely possible that examining how social support functions in a laboratory setting will still allow the desirable generalization to the population at large. In this manner specific questions can be asked and hopefully resolved. Will

subjects behave as we have seen them behave in the Cutrona experiment, having those high in perceived social support receiving more help than those low in perceived social support? If we manipulate the availability of help will we see subjects responding differently, based upon differing levels of perceived social support?

Hypothesis: That subjects with high levels of social support will utilize help more than those with low levels of social support when it is readily available.

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