

Family Functioning, Perceived Social Support, Academic Performance and Self-Esteem

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the relationships between family functioning, social support, academic performance and self-esteem among young adults. A single survey was carried out to gather data from the subjects. The sample consisted of 378 students, aged between 18 to 26 years old. The samples were drawn through a convenience and stratified sampling from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman and Sunway University College, Malaysia. Bivariate correlation and linear regression were used to analyse the relationships between the variables. T-test was also employed to in order to find out the differences between genders on the academic performance and self-esteem. The results revealed that there was a significant relationship between family functioning and social support on students' self-esteem. Nevertheless, no correlation was found between family functioning and social support on the students' academic performance. On the other hand, females outperformed their male counterparts in their academic performance, but showed no significant differences in their self-esteem.

Keywords: Academic performance, family functioning, self-esteem, social support

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------------|
| B: | Unstandardized Coefficients |
| B: | Standardized Coefficients |
| F: | F test |
| N: | Sample size |
| p: | Probability |
| r: | Coefficient Correlation |
| SE B: | Standard Error of Estimate |
| t: | t test |
| R: | Coefficient Regression |
| R ² : | Adjusted R Square |
| d: | Level of gender differences |

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the quality of family functioning has been an interesting study of the society. During the developing years of an individual, family plays a significant role in children's life. Children's level of self-esteem and academic performance are mostly influenced by their family (McInerney, Dowson, Yeung and Nelson, 1998). In some ways,

family is an important source of social support for them, and likewise, the social support which consists of friends and classmates might also play a role in developing their self-esteem and the level of academic performance. Adolescents who experience "unpleasant family interactions and family stress" grow up to be incapable of expressing their thoughts effectively and more likely to express the dissatisfaction of their family interactions when associating with their peers. In the long run, these children will grow into adolescents who have negative views of themselves (Shagle and Barber, 1995). Similarly, this will be reflected in their level of perceived social support from their family, friends and significant others. Cumsille and Epstein (1994) mentioned in their study that the perceived social support from friends could serve as defence towards the progress of depression, when support was failed to be provided by the child's family. Before further discussion, the definition of variables and research evidences should be reviewed.

DEFINITION

Family Functioning

In this context, a good family functioning refers to family members who are willing to solve problems together, showing concern towards each other, and there are fewer quarrels (Blake and Slate, 1993). According to Berg-Cross, Kidd and Carr (1990), cohesive families are characterized by a family atmosphere of support and understanding. Shek (2002), on the other hand, defines family functioning as the “quality of family life at the systemic and dyadic levels and concerns wellness, competence, strengths, and weaknesses of a family”.

Social Support

House (1981) defined social support as the flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, and/or appraisal between people. According to Maher, Mora and Leventhal (2006), perceived support is the subjective sense that people are available and willing to satisfy a range of roles which include emotional, friendship, and tangible needs. In the study by Malecki and Demaray (2006), social support was conceptualized as the support which students perceived as being available to them from their parents, teachers, classmates, close friends, and their schools.

Academic Performance

Academic achievement, which is similar to academic performance, has been defined broadly. Academic achievement is the inclusion of outcomes which are related empirically or conceptually to school achievement. These include grades, academic motivation, and behaviour problems (Mandara, 2006). On the other hand, Malecki and Demaray (2006) conceptualized academic achievement simply as the grade point average (GPA) in schools.

Self-Esteem

Freshbach and Weiner (1991) define self-esteem as the positive or negative value a person places on his or her own attribute. Self-esteem also means how a person feels about himself or herself. According to Cashwell (1995), an individual with high self-esteem considers himself/ herself a worthy person, while an individual with low self-esteem is often seen as one who engages in self-rejection, self-dissatisfaction, and self-contempt. Self-esteem is crucial in maintaining or restoring an individual's physical and mental health.

RESEARCH EVIDENCES

Family Functioning and Academic Performance

According to Scott (2004), the quality of family life, which is also a family functioning, is causally and indirectly related to academic performance. Problems such as academic failure and underachievement have been linked to family functioning (family life-family conflict, communication and organization). Scott (2004) indicated in his study that children who came from “intact” homes were more advantaged in their academic achievement. In his study, parent-youth communication in early adolescence was a key factor in leading to good academic achievement. In addition, a study by Shek (2002) found that family functioning had a strong connection with adolescents' adjustment (academic performance, satisfaction with academic performance and conduct).

A study carried out on the African-American families revealed higher overall GPAs, Math and Science results, and verbal performances when parents were actively involved in their children academic pursue (Mandara, 2006). In addition, another study of Duchesne and Larose (2007) found that adolescents' attachment to both parents was positively correlated with their academic motivation. They attained similar results in their study which showed that increased contacts with parents, in a positive nature, undoubtedly increased the students' achievement.

However, the study of Walker and Satterwhite (2002), on the academic performances among African American and Caucasian college students, suggested that the family has important but less effect at the college level. When comparing the White and African American families, in terms of adolescents' academic performance and family functioning, it was revealed that the family relationships between the two ethnic backgrounds did not significantly differ, but the Whites were indicated to have better academic performance. As a whole, the evidences gathered from a number of research revealed that family functioning had a strong connection with adolescents' academic achievement. However, there were also studies which suggested that family functioning had important but less effect at the college level.

Social Support and Academic Performance

Previous research discovered weak evidence between social support and academic performance. Malecki and Elliott (1999) investigated the

relationship between social support and grade point average (GPA) in a sample of seventh thorough 12th graders. They found a small but significant relationship between the students' perceived support and their overall GPA. Additionally, they also found a significant relationship between teachers' support and GPA. Similarly, Rosenfeld, Richman, and Bowen (2000) found that students with high social support from parents, teachers, and friends had better grades as compared with those without such support.

To further support this point, Malecki and Demaray (2006) reported that regardless of the students' socioeconomic status, higher social support in terms of parental support and classmate support were related to a higher GPA. In the same vein, Levitt, Guacci-Franco and Levitt (1994) also found a significant relationship between social support and standardized test scores in a sample of multi-ethnic students; however, no relationship was found between social support and GPA.

A study conducted by McInerney, Dowson, Yeung and Nelson (1998) indicated that parent, teacher and peer support had a significant positive impact on the students' interest in schoolwork and their GPA. Additionally, a study conducted by Degarmo and Martinez (2006) revealed that combined sources of social support were important in contributing to the academic well-being of Latino youths.

On the other end of the continent, there are studies which have yielded a negative relationship between peer social support and academic achievements. This means the lower the social support that adolescent perceives from their peers, the higher their achievement outcomes will be. This could be due to the fact adolescents felt challenged when they did not receive social support, and therefore used this factor as their motivation to achieve academically (Cauce, Felner and Primavera, 1982; Cotterell, 1992).

In sum, most studies found that students who received high social support from parents, teachers, and friends had better grades compared to those without such support. On the other hand, only few studies have shown the negative relationships between the two variables.

Family Functioning and Self-Esteem

Family functioning was found to be linked with adolescents' self-esteem in a Chinese sample (Shek, 2002). The participants in the current consisted

of 1519 secondary school students, ranging in the age from 11 to 18 years old. The Chinese Family Assessment Instrument and Self-Esteem Scale were used to gather the necessary data. The findings of the current research indicated that family functioning was indeed associated with students' self-esteem. According to Mandara and Murray (2000), family functioning has shown to have a positive effect on self-esteem. Both researchers conducted a study on 116 fifteen-year-old African Americans. The participants provided information on their perceptions of self-esteem and family functioning using the MDSEI (Multi-Dimensional Self-Esteem Inventory) and FES (Family Environment Scale). Indeed, the results revealed that the optimal family functioning was a strong predictor. This implied that the better the family functioning, the higher the self-esteem of the African American adolescents. Shek (1998) also found that discrepancies in the adolescent's perceptions of family functioning influenced the psychological well-being (self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness, life satisfaction, purpose in life and general psychiatric morbidity) over time.

Brody and Flor (1997) found similar results where self-esteem was linked with family routines and the quality of mother-child relationship. Individuals who viewed their parents' communication as supportive and open would most probably have higher self-esteem than those who perceived their parents' communication patterns as controlling and unsupportive (Blake and Slate, 1993). These results are consistent with the findings of Rochelle's (2001) study, which found that there was a significant positive correlation between the perceived family support and self-esteem. However, a study in which the sample was a group of Chinese adolescence from the Mainland China, found that parental support was not a distinct predictor of the adolescents' self-esteem (Bush, Peterson, Cobas and Supple, 2002).

In sum, various research evidences revealed that family functioning was associated with self-esteem, whereby the optimal family functioning was a strong predictor. Limited research implied that family functioning was not a significant predictor for higher self-esteem.

Social Support and Self-Esteem

It is suggested that individuals who perceive the presence of supportive family and peers are more likely to feel greater self-esteem (Pierce *et al.*, 2000,

as cited in Measelle, Stice and Springer, 2006). Their research revealed that more significant positive effects of support were received from their teachers and friends on adolescents' self-esteem over time as compared to the support from either the mother or father.

McInerney, Dowson, Yeung and Nelson (1998) found similar findings that parent, teacher and peer support had significantly positive impacts on students' self-esteem, in which the teachers played the strongest influential role on the self-esteem of the high-school sub-sample. Additionally, in the study by Shute, Blasio and Williamson (2002), self-esteem was found to have a significantly positive correlation with the overall social support satisfaction and the size of the support network.

In sum, previous research evidences revealed that social support had a positive relationship with adolescents' self-esteem. This finding also suggests that the higher the level of perceived social support, the better the level of self-esteem will be.

Gender Differences in Academic Performance

Prior to 1970s, interest in gender differences in academic performance revolved around the possibility that girls were outperforming boys in reading during the elementary school years (Brophy, 1985, as cited in Wilkinson and Marrett, 1988). Girls performed better in reading and other related subjects throughout elementary school and into the adolescent years (Dwyer and Johnson, 1997; Entwisle, 1997).

By the 1970s, attention was shifted to the possibility that boys were outperforming girls in Maths and Science, particularly during adolescence. However, boys have rarely been found to outperform girls in terms of grades in Mathematics and Science, even during adolescence; in fact, girls have often been found to outperform boys (Dwyer and Johnson, 1997; Kimball, 1989).

Gender Differences in Self-Esteem

As for self-esteem, many researchers found that males had higher levels of self-esteem as compared to females (Allgood-Merten and Stockard, 1991; Feather, 1991; Fertman and Chubb, 1992). Quatman and Watson (2001) found similar results, which indicated a higher self-esteem for the males as compared to females.

Whereas, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) determined that the studies they reviewed were

too disparate to come to a conclusion about the presence or absence of gender differences. Feingold (1994) reviewed gender differences in multiple aspects of personality and found a small difference favouring males ($d=.10$), and this finding was compared to another analysis which also found a small difference favouring males ($d=.12$) (Hall, 1984). Gender differences in self-esteem conducted prior to the advent of meta-analysis (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Wylie, 1979) suggested that there was no consistent gender difference, yet they differed in their rationale. However, there were researchers who found that there were no gender differences related to self-esteem (Greene and Wheatley, 1992; Simpson, Gangestad and Lerma, 1990).

General Issue

Since academic performance and the development of self-esteem in a person's life are important for the individual's future and personal growth, it is therefore necessary to investigate the relationship between these variables. In general, there are meaningful relationships between the four variables, which include family functioning, social support, academic performance and self-esteem. Previous research have proven that they are interrelated, which means that family functioning and social support are related to self-esteem and academic performance. Aside from that, previous researches have also found significant gender differences in academic performance and self-esteem. Generally, males were found to outperform females in the academic performance and they also had scored higher in self-esteem when compared to females.

The Aim of the Study and Research Hypotheses

As for this research, the focus was given on the effects of family functioning and the perceived social support on the academic performance and development of self-esteem among selected university students. In this research, it was hypothesized that:

1. Students who possessed good family functioning and perceived more social support would have a higher academic performance.
2. Students who had good family functioning and perceived more social support would have a better self-esteem.

3. There is a significant difference in the academic performance of the male and female students.
4. There is a significant difference in the self-esteem of the male and female students.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The present research was based on the Ecological Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1975). The Ecological Theory expounds the impacts of parental relationship on children's development. In fact, Bronfenbrenner's study demonstrated the important role of the environment on human development. Parents bring their own life history, their own personalities, and their relationship with each other into the family dynamics. Significant parental conflict has a profound effect on the entire family system. Children are said to suffer from insecure attachment under such a family situation. According to Baumrind (Bronfenbrenner and Mahoney, 1975), the parent's own internal working model of attachment seems to have a very strong effect on the family system and thus on the children. This means that adults who themselves are securely attached are much more likely to have a child who is also securely attached.

Bronfrenner (1975), in his area of study, emphasizes that each child grows up in a complex social environment with a distinct cast of character such as brothers, sisters, parents, teachers and friends. This cast itself is embedded within a larger social system. Bronfrenner's argument is that researchers must not only include descriptions of these more extended aspects of the environment,

but also consider the ways in which all the components of this complex system interact with one another to affect the development of an individual child.

With relevance to the literature relating to this study, majority of the past research indicated that both family functioning and social support were positively correlated with academic performance (Maleki and Elliot, 1999). In terms of family functioning, parent-child relationship is said to play a major role in inculcating good academic performance (Scott, 2004). Similarly, most prior studies have found a significant relationship between family functioning, social support and self-esteem. In addition, previous researches have also suggested that social support, especially from parents, peers and teachers, are important in contributing to a better self-esteem. In summary, it was generally found that both family functioning and social support have a significant positive relationship with academic performance and self-esteem (see *Fig. 1*). On a larger scale, based on the same model, social support is seen to mediate better family functioning, and in turn, results in better academic outcomes (King *et al.*, 2005). In most of the research evidences, females were found to outperform their male counterparts in their academic performance (Dwyer and Johnson, 1997; Entwisle, 1997). However, males tend to have a higher self-esteem as compared to females in most of the cases undertaken in various studies (Allgood-Merten and Stockard, 1991; Feather, 1991; Fertman and Chubb, 1992).

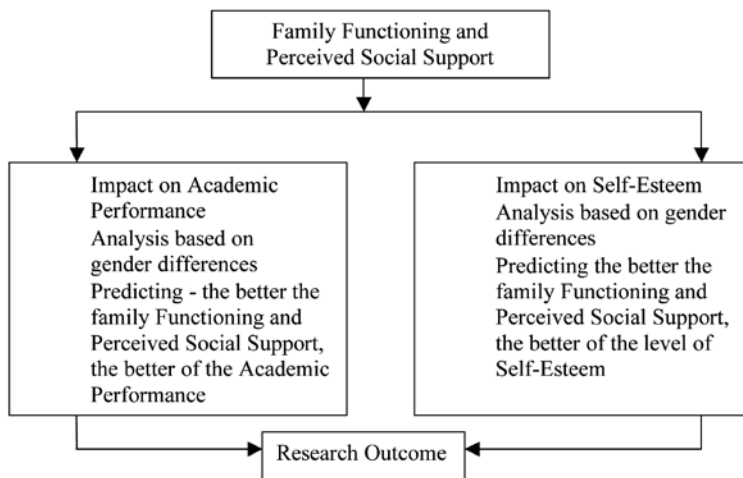


Fig. 1: Significance relationship of family functioning and social support with academic performance and self-esteem

METHOD

Pilot Test Sampling

The pilot test was conducted on 30 participants, with their ages ranging from 18 years to 23 years old. From the 30 participants, 17 (56.7%) were males, while 13 (43.3%) were females. Out of the 30 participants, a majority (15) of them were Chinese (50%), followed by 8 (26.7%) Malays, and 7 (23.3%) Indians. In order to ascertain the validation locally, a reliability analysis was carried out to determine the Cronbach alpha of all the three measurement instruments. The Cronbach alpha for the 40 items of the Family Functioning Scale (FFS) was indicated as .842. Whereas, the Cronbach alpha for the 40 items of the Self-Esteem Rating Scale (SERS) was .937, and finally, the Cronbach alpha for the 12 items of the Multidimensional Scale of the Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was .893.

Sample

The total number of respondents for this study was 378; they were undergraduates from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman and Sunway University College. The sample was controlled for age, year of course, race, and gender. The age of the subjects ranged from 18 to 26 years old, with the mean age of 21.1 years. In terms of their ethnic groups, the sample consisted of 126 (33.33%) Malays, 126 (33.33%) Chinese, and 126 (33.33%) Indians. In terms of gender, the sample consisted of 189 (50.0%) males and 189 (50.0%) females.

Procedure

This survey was carried out in the Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman and the School of Health and Natural Sciences, Sunway University College, Selangor. Courses of students varied from the studies of psychology, communication, public relation, English and Chinese. The questionnaires were distributed through a convenience sampling by five research assistants to respondents who were willing to participate in the survey. Firstly, non-probabilistic sampling was adopted. For this, 600 respondents were involved in the first stage of survey. A brief introduction of the team was done, and this was followed by a briefing on the purpose of the survey. The briefing was done in English, unless requested by the participants to have it in either Mandarin or Bahasa Malaysia. However, all respondents were students of higher institutions and were proficient in English. Most

of the respondents answered the questionnaires and returned the survey on the spot. Some respondents wished to bring home the survey and returned them the next day. In order to get the equal numbers for both gender and ethnic, stratified sampling and quota were applied. Finally, a sample consisting of 378 respondents, with 198 males and 198 females respectively, was drawn for this study.

Instruments

(i) Academic Performance

The respondents' academic performance was measured by their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). A 4-point grading system was adopted for all the Bachelor courses, and the classification of awards of Bachelor Degree was based on the CGPA achieved by these students. Higher grade represents a better academic performance. The award of honours is as shown below: first class honours (CGPA 3.5000-4.0000), second class honours - upper division (CGPA 3.0000-3.4999), second class honours - lower division (CGPA 2.2000- 2.9999) and third class honours (CGPA 2.0000-2.1999).

(ii) Family Functioning Scale

Family Functioning Scale is a 40-items instrument which examines the general dimensions of family functioning. Respondents were required to rate themselves on a 7-point scale (i.e. Never = 1, Almost never = 2, Rarely = 3, Sometimes = 4, Frequently = 5, Almost always = 6, and Always = 7). Items 4, 21, and 38 were first reverse-scored, then simply summed up for the total scale scores. Higher scores are indicative of better family functioning. The Family Functioning Scale (FFS) has a fair internal consistency with alphas which range from .90 for the positive family effect subscale to .74 for the conflicts subscale. The alpha of the total scale was not reported or test-retested. The FFS has a good concurrent validity, as demonstrated by the correlations with the FACES III measure of the family functioning. The FFS has been validated locally with a high reliability of Cronbach alpha (.842).

(iii) Self-Esteem Rating Scale

Self-Esteem Rating Scale is a 40-items instrument which provides a clinical measure of self-esteem, in which respondents are required to rate themselves on a 7-point scale (i.e. Never = 1, Rarely = 2, A little of the time = 3, Some of the time = 4, A

good part of the time = 5, Most of the time = 6, and Always = 7). Positive scores indicate a more positive self-esteem and negative scores indicate a more negative self-esteem. The Self-esteem Rating Scale (SERS) has excellent internal consistency, with an alpha of .97. It has been reported to have good content and factorial validity. The SERS also has good construct validity, with significant correlations, with the Index of Self-esteem and the Generalized Contentment Scale. The SERS has been validated locally with high reliability of Cronbach alpha (.937).

(iv) Multidimensional Scale of the Perceived Social Support

Multidimensional Scale of the Perceived Social Support is a 12-item instrument designed to measure the perceived social support from three different sources: family, friends, and significant others. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) assesses the extent to which respondents perceive social support from each of these sources; the scale is divided into three sub-scales: family (items 3, 4, 8, 11); friends (items 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12); and significant others (items 1, 2, 5, 10). The MSPSS is scored by summing individual item scores for the total and subscale scores and dividing by the number of items. Higher scores reflect higher perceived support. The MSPSS has an excellent internal consistency and good test-retest reliability. The MSPSS also has good factorial validity, concurrent validity, and good construct validity. The MSPSS

has been validated locally with high reliability of Cronbach alpha (.893).

Data Analysis

In this study, family functioning and social support served as independent variables while academic performance and self-esteem served as dependent variables. Data collected were analysed by using the SPSS. A bivariate correlation and linear regression were also used to analyse the relationships between the family functioning, social support, academic performance and self-esteem. Independent sample t-test was used to analyse gender differences for academic performance and self-esteem among the male and female students.

RESULTS

In addition, the relationship between family functioning and academic performance was explored using the Pearson's product moment correlation. There was no relationship between the two variables ($r=.046$, $p>.05$), suggesting that the academic performance of the students were not affected by the quality of family functioning (see Table 1).

The relationship between social support and academic performance was explored using the Pearson's product moment correlation. Once again, no relationship was found between the two variables ($r=.068$, $p >.05$) and this finding suggested that the academic performances of students were not affected by their perceived social support (see Table 2).

TABLE 1
Correlation between family functioning and academic performance

| | |
|----------------------|------|
| Family functioning | |
| | .046 |
| Academic performance | |

TABLE 2
Correlation between social support and academic performance

| | |
|----------------------|------|
| Social Support | |
| | .068 |
| Academic Performance | |

The relationship between family functioning and self-esteem was explored using the Pearson's product moment correlation. The result showed that there was a positive correlation ($r=.216$, $p<.01$) between family functioning and self-esteem, suggesting that students with a better family functioning have a higher self-esteem (see Table 3).

Similarly, the relationship between social support and self-esteem was explored using the Pearson's product moment correlation. The results revealed that there was a positive correlation ($r=.317$, $p<.01$) between social support and self-esteem, suggesting that students with higher perceived social support possessed higher self-esteem (see Table 4).

In sum, family functioning contributed 4.67% ($r = .216$) to self-esteem and social support contributed 10.04% ($r = .317$) to self-esteem. These findings show that social support plays a more significant role as compared to family functioning on the students' self-esteem.

Altogether, both the family functioning and social support contributed 10.8 % towards the

students' self-esteem in the current study. These two variables significantly contributed towards students' self-esteem and the likelihood of such a result, arising by sampling error is 1 in 100. $F [(2, 375) = 22.619$, $p<.01$].

From the coefficient table, social support has a regression coefficient of .708. Thus, as perceived social support increases by one unit, self-esteem increases by .708. The t-value is 5.090, with an associated probability of .01. Hence, regression coefficient is unlikely to have arisen by sampling error. In terms of family functioning, it has a regression coefficient of .109. This means that as family functioning increases by one unit, self-esteem is also increased by .109. The t-value is 1.753, with an associated probability $> .05$. Therefore, regression coefficient is likely to have arisen by sampling error.

Based on the above coefficient table, family functioning and perceived social support could be concluded as playing important roles in affecting the students' self-esteem. Between the two, social support is shown to play a more important role in affecting students' self-esteem (see Table 5).

TABLE 3
Correlation between family functioning and self-esteem

| | |
|--------------------|----------|
| Family Functioning | |
| | .216(**) |
| Self-esteem | |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

TABLE 4
Correlation between social support and self-esteem

| | |
|----------------|----------|
| Social Support | |
| | .317(**) |
| Self-esteem | |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

TABLE 5
Summary of ordinary least squares multiple regression analysis for social support and family functioning for predicting self-esteem (N=378)

| | B | SE B | B |
|--------------------|------|------|--------|
| Self-Esteem | | | |
| Social Support | .708 | .139 | .276** |
| Family Functioning | .109 | .062 | .095 |

Note: $R^2 = .108$ $F [(2,375) = 22.619$, $p<.01$]. ** Significant at $p<.01$ level.

The mean differences of the respondents' academic performance and self-esteem were assessed via T-test. The mean score of the academic performance for males ($M=2.9065$) was found to be lower than the females ($M= 3.0444$). Meanwhile, male students were indicated to have lower academic performance as compared to female students [$t(376) = -2.687, p < .01$]. These

findings indicated that there were significant differences for the academic performance among the male and female students. In this study, the mean score of self-esteem for the males was $M=192.93$ and females was $M= 191.79$. However, no significant differences were found for the self-esteem among the male and female students [$t(376) = .369, p > .05$] (see Table 6).

TABLE 6
T-test of academic performance and self-esteem by gender status

| Gender | Mean Scores | |
|----------------------|-------------|----------|
| | Male | Female |
| Academic Performance | 2.9065 | 3.0444** |
| Self-esteem | 192.93 | 191.79 |

** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study was to examine whether there were relationships between family functioning, social support, academic performance and self-esteem. Additionally, this study also sought to explore if there was a significant difference between the male and female respondents in relation to academic performance and self-esteem. In this study, family functioning and perceived social support were found to be not correlated with the students' academic performance. The first hypothesis, which predicted a positive relationship between family functioning and perceived social support with academic performance, was therefore rejected. However, the results of the current research revealed that there were positive relationships between family functioning, perceived social support and self-esteem. The better the family functioning and perceived social support of the respondents, the better the level of self-esteem will be. Hence, the second hypothesis was accepted. Gender differences on academic performance and self-esteem were assessed using t-test. Results gathered in this study revealed that the male students had a lower academic performance as compared to the female students. However, there was no significant difference when measured the self-esteem among the male and female students.

Generally, the results of the present study supported the Ecological Theory of Bronfrenner

(1975), whereby in his area of study, he emphasized that each child grew up in a complex social environment, with a distinct cast of characters such as parents, brothers, sisters, teachers and friends. This cast itself is embedded within a larger social system. The present study showed that besides family functioning, social support also played a crucial role in determining the academic performance and self-esteem of an individual. This study supports the findings of Ecological theory. However, it shows that parental relationship is not the only contributory factor of self-esteem of the child; in fact, there are other contributory factors. Bronfrenner's argument is that researchers must not only include descriptions of these more extended aspects of the environment, but also consider the ways in which all the components of this complex system interact with one another to affect the development of an individual child.

Family Functioning and Academic Performance

Based on the results of the present study, better family functioning did not affect the students' academic performance. This result is incongruent with the study of Fuglini and Pedersen (2002) on 745 American ethnically diverse individuals, who began to move from secondary school to young adulthood. The researchers found that family obligation was more important if the adolescents had lower and moderate GPA.

Although there is a number of researches which disagree with the present findings, the results of this study is in accordance with Walker and Satterwhite (2002), whose sample comprised of college students. It is assumed that college and university level is similar, and thus this study agrees on their suggestion that family was important, but it had a less effect on the academic performance at this stage. This is perhaps due to the fact that these university students were independent and not staying with their family. Moreover, a lifetime of parental supports already allowed the students to acquire the necessary coping skills and self-confidence so as to adapt to the new environment. At the university level, they are able to cope effectively with the challenges imposed developing adaptive attitudes, which is essential for excellent academic performance. Thus, the level of family functioning does not affect their academic performance, as they are not at home and not that attached to the family.

Social Support and Academic Performance

The findings of this study have contributed to the collection of other researches which showed inconsistencies in the significance roles of social support and academic performance. Other previous researches also found both weak and strong evidences in the relationships of these variables. These inconsistencies were probably due to the different types of social support received and the different ways the individuals respond to it.

A research conducted by Malecki and Elliott (1999) revealed that teachers' support was linked to academic performance, while the research of Malecki and Demaray (2006) discovered that parental and classmates' supports were related to higher CGPA. However, Ratelle, Larose, Guay and Acenecal (2005), who conducted a study on 729 science students from Quebec, found that parental support predicted better academic achievement. Thus, it is suggested that individuals responded differently to the different types of support received (e.g. supports from classmates, parents, teachers, siblings, friends, etc). Some might do better academically with teachers' support, and at the same time, some others might not be affected by the support given by the teachers.

The present study found that perceived social support did not affect the academic performance of the students and this was congruent with the

study of Hershberger and D'Augelli (1992) who found that perceived social support could not be used to judge the academic performance of the African American students in a White community. These results seemed to apply to other immigrants, whereby they were mostly Asian students in the U.S. These Asian students reported that the social support from peers did not affect their academic outcomes and that there were no relationships between the two variables. The present study also revealed insignificant relationship between social support and the academic performance of the students, and hence supported the results gathered for the Asian students.

In studying the cultural differences and the effect of social support on academic performance, an important factor which needs to be considered among ethnic minorities is the adjustment to a different culture. Coleman, LaFromboise and Saner (1992) conducted a study on 88 ethnic minority freshmen (Hispanic, African American, Native American) and 30 Anglo freshmen. Their study found that the ethnic minority freshmen and Anglo freshmen who were able to adapt, possessed better academic grades and they did not receive a lot of social support.

Gender Differences for Academic Performance and Self-esteem

The current research represents an important starting point for building models for the academic performance and self-esteem of gender differences among university students. Although female students were found to have the edge over the male students in terms of academic performance, this edge was lost when it came to the comparison of self-esteem. The pattern of findings is consistent with several other research evidences which identified the factors causing females to perform better in their studies. For example, females tend to be more concerned than males in pleasing adults, such as parents and teachers, the reason which may underlie both gender differences (Higgins, 1991; Hoffman, 1972; Pomerantz and Ruble, 1998a, 1998b; Pomerantz *et al.*, 2001). In addition, females' concern may heighten their effort to do well in the university, therefore enhancing their performance, whereas male's performance may decline in comparison because they are not as concerned as the females with pleasing adults. Moreover, given the fact that males are not as likely

to see their academic performance as reflecting their abilities, they may exert less effort.

The students' academic performance is perhaps not only affected by the different types of social support groups, but it is also related across time and age. Maybe, only a certain type of social support would significantly affect the students' performance at a certain developmental stage in life. Therefore, this leaves space for future research, particularly to investigate the specific type of support, and its significant effect on the academic performance, at a certain developmental stage.

Gender differences in the levels of self-esteem have been widely investigated, with most studies found that girls have lower level of self-esteem than boys in adolescence (Bryan and Petrangelo, 1989; O'Mallery and Bachman, 1979). However, in the present study, no significant difference was found prior to the analysis, the result which opposed the conclusions given by most of the other researchers.

Family Functioning, Social Support and Self-Esteem

Family functioning and perceived social support were significantly correlated with the students' self-esteem. The main hypothesis, which predicted a positive relationship between family functioning and perceived social support with self-esteem, was therefore supported. This finding is in agreement with the results of other researches which were done in countries other than Malaysia. As other studies have shown, family functioning seems to significantly predict students' self-esteem (Mandara and Murray, 2000). This suggests that the better the quality of family functioning, the higher the self-esteem among students.

The present study proposed some degree of relationship between family functioning and self-esteem and supported the research evidences of other researchers (Scott *et al.*, 1991, as cited in Cashwell) who discovered that there was a general uniformity across cultures regarding the magnitude of the correlation between family functioning and self-esteem. This means that there are no significant differences across cultures in relation to the relationship between family functioning and self-esteem. Thus, family functioning does play an important role in affecting students' self-esteem, regardless of the culture.

On the other hand, greater social support will also result in higher self-esteem among the students. In fact, the results of the present study indicated that among the two variables (family functioning and social support), social support was shown to be relatively more important than family functioning in contributing towards students' self-esteem. These findings are congruent with the study of Shute, Blasio and Williamson (2002) who found that social support satisfaction was positively correlated with self-esteem.

Furthermore, perceived social support could enhance self-esteem. The results of the present study supported the study by Gavazzi (1994) who studied on a clinical population of adolescence and found that adolescents who perceived higher social support from family and friends had a higher level of self-esteem. It is suggested that despite the different ethnic groups and culture in Malaysia, social support does play an important part in developing an individual's self-esteem.

Based on the results of the present study (linear regression), social support is indicated to play a bigger role on self-esteem as compared to family functioning. This is due to the fact that social support consists of parental support, i.e. the better the family functioning, the better the relationship among family members will be. Good relationships among siblings and parents will indirectly provide a more perceived social support. With this in mind, it can be assumed that good family functioning provides a better social support. Thus, there is probably an over-lapping of the contribution of family functioning and social support on self-esteem.

Strengths of the Study

Despite some shortcomings, the present study revealed a number of strengths. Performing research on a sample of 378 respondents and drawing inference from the results which resembled the whole of the population would increase the reliability of the estimate. In this case, a relatively large sample size allows the investigation on the effects of family functioning and social support on the academic performance and self-esteem of university students. In terms of comparison between genders, an equal number of males and females provided a sensible comparison of the variables. Another particular strength of the present study is that the four constructs,

used to measure the variables, have been proven high on reliability and validity, based on prior research. In addition, the pilot test demonstrated a high level of reliability for the local validation. In administering the questionnaire, consent form was attached to obtain approval from the respondents. This resembled an adoption of proper procedures for data collection and safeguarded against any dispute from respondents pertaining to confidentiality.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations in this study. For example, instead of relying on the self-report data, the researchers should have opted for the typology method which classified families according to different dimensions and investigated the relationships for each family type with other variables (such as self-esteem and academic performance). This method would allow a better comparison between the family types and the interaction within a particular family type. All the subjects were drawn from higher institutions in Selangor. The high concentration of the subjects in narrow localities might prevent the results from being reflective of the Malaysian population. Other than that, the study adopted a paper and pencil approach in collecting information from the respondents and problems might arise when the questionnaires were distributed to respondents who were impatient in answering them as this might affect the accuracy of the results.

Future Research

The present study selected students from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman and Sunway University College as its sample. Future research should examine the differences between ethnicities in relation to how family functioning and social support may influence the academic performance and self-esteem in more universities located in both the rural and urban areas. Taking into account samples from rural areas may add a variety to samples as they come from different backgrounds, and environment, hence extending the ambit and applicability of the study to include a wider range of people. Aside from that, in the present study, the students' CGPAs were used as the only method to measure their academic performance. However, it is suggested that other forms of valid and reliable measurements related to the academic performance should also be used.

CONCLUSIONS

As a whole, this research was done to investigate the relationships between family functioning, and social support on academic performance and self-esteem. The results of the present study showed that family functioning and social support played significant roles on students' self-esteem, whereas family functioning and social support did not affect their academic performance. Gender differences have been seen to directly affect the academic performance of the students, whereby females have been found to outperform the males in their academic performance. With further and deeper research on this issue in the Malaysian context, its results will surely contribute to the development of self-esteem and academic performance of students.

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