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ABSTRACT

As the belief that social support and coping can moderate the impact of stress becomes part of the common wisdom in the mental health field, the demand for support-oriented interventions has increased. However, a review of the stress-buffering research indicates that the effect of support is more modest and more complex than most researchers suggest. Interesting stress-support relationships at the significant level have led many to pay less attention to the implications of the large numbers of nonsignificant and problematic findings. Some inconsistencies may be due to methodological issues both in hypothesis development and statistical design. A more enriched understanding of the role of social support requires a paradigm shift that will expand the questions being asked. Research should focus on an ecological perspective examining the determinants of stress, coping, and support patterns; the costs and consequences associated with helping behavior; systematic consequences of support patterns; and the social and personal context of support. Such an approach goes beyond the stress-buffering hypothesis, toward providing a richer understanding of the role of support in the process of adaptation. (BL)

STRESS, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND FUNCTIONING:

BEYOND THE STRESS-BUFFERING EFFECT

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INTRODUCTION

As the belief that social support and coping can moderate the impact of stress becomes part of our common folk wisdom within the mental health field, there have been increased calls for support-oriented interventions that might increase individuals' capabilities to withstand and overcome stressful situations (e.g.,Bloom, Hodges, & Caldwell, 1982; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1981; Gartner & Riessman, 1984; Gottlieb, 1983a; Whittaker & Garbarino, 1983). Such strategies make good intuitive sense to a diverse array of people: Among individually oriented practitioners, the idea of maximizing the social resources of the individual fits quite well with crisis theory concepts and community mental health ideology. Among community psychologists, the linking of social support to various aspects of psychological adaptation offers a theoretical foundation for developing broad-based preventive interventions. And finally, within the federal government, the notion of informal support is quite consistent with the emphasis on developing non-institutional responses to social problems, and on transferring fiscal responsibility for services away from the public sector.

In part, just the sheer volume of recent studies on support has conferred increasing legitimacy on the idea of the stress-buffering effect. However, this explosion of recent work has also increased the difficulty for individuals in developing a cumulative sense of findings across this very diverse set of studies. The purpose of my talk this afternoon is to share with you some of my thoughts and conclusions after recently reviewing the stress-buffering literature on social support, especially with regard to its utility in guiding people who are involved in the design of support-oriented intervention programs. I will be concerned with three related questions:

(1) To what extent does the research base provide evidence of the existence of the stress-buffering effect of support? I believe that the evidence is less consistent and more complex than some reviewers have implied. (2) What methodological issues need to be resolved? Among the many that could be discussed, I will mention several that have received only modest attention, and that have particular relevance to those attempting to apply support concepts. (3) What conceptual issues need to be addressed? I believe that a paradigm shift needs to take place so that we broaden the kinds of questions that we are asking about social support. I will argue that an ecological perspective provides a conceptual framework that enriches our understanding of the role of support and enhances our ability to influence supportive processes by directing our attention to the broader social context out of which stress and support processes emerge.

CURRENT FINDINGS

To draw some conclusions about the current status of social support, I searched the literature and found approximately 50 studies that examined the stress-buffering effect of support on psychological as opposed to physical well-being. In reviewing these studies, I found a number of factors that led me to conclude that the evidence for the existence of a stress-buffering effect of support is more modest and more complex than most people suggest. Let me mention 5 points.

(1) First, although the large majority of studies claimed to provide evidence for the stress-buffering effect of support, significant interaction effects were usually found for only a few of the support or functioning measures being considered. For each study, most of which used multiple measures of stress, support and functioning, I calculated the total number

of seperate interaction effects that were tested, as well as the number of effects that were significant at the .05 level. Across all studies, the proportion of significant effects was only 17.3%; Across all studies that had found some evidence of the buffering effect, the proportion of significant effects was only 18.7%; For example, Caldwell & Bloom (1982) investigated the relationship between social support and psychological functioning following marital disruption. They collected multiple measures of support and functioning at two points in time. Of the 63 interaction effects they tested, 5 were in a direction consistent with the buffering hypothesis. Similarly, a recent study in the Journal of Abnormal Psychology described several interesting stress-support interaction findings, when in fact less than 5% of the interaction effects tested were significant (i.e., Monroe, Imhoff, Wise, & Harris, 1983). The excitement among researchers of finding genuinely interesting stress-support relationships has led many to pay less attention to the implications of large numbers of nonsignificant and problematic findings in both their own work and in the work in the field cumulatively.

(2) Second, when one considers longitudinal studies, which usually enter controls for the influence of initial levels of psychological dysfunction, the percentage of significant effects drops to about 13%.

(3) Third, the increment in explained variance found by adding an interaction term is often quite small. It is a bit ironic that some studies provide no information concerning the increment in explained variance, since the failure to explain much variance was one of the criticisms of the stress-illness literature that led to an interest in social support.

(4) Fourth, some studies have found significant interaction effects in directions opposite those predicted. In several studies, over 15% of the

significant interaction effects were in directions opposite that which the buffering hypothesis would predict (e.g., Caldwell & Bloom, 1982; Husiani, Neff, Newbrough, & Moore, 1982; LaRocco, House & French, 1979).

(5) Fifth, even among results that present the predicted stress-support interaction, one sometimes finds crossover effects. This refers to the situation in which the predicted stress-functioning regression lines for different levels of support cross as stress levels decline. Thus, higher levels of support are associated with better functioning at high levels of stress, but are associated with poorer functioning at low levels of stress. Such findings are mentioned by Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Karasek, Triantis, & Chaudhry, 1982; and Sandler & Lakey, 1982. One interpretation is that the obligations inherent in maintaining interpersonal relationships create some strain that becomes evident only under conditions of low cumulative stress.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Some of these inconsistencies may be partially resolved as investigators begin to come to grips with some fundamental methodological issues. I will mention three issues that I think are just beginning to receive the attention they deserve, and which are particularly relavant to program designers.

1.) First, what is the form of the buffering effect that we are testing? As Finney and his colleagues suggest in a recent paper, there are different forms of the buffering effect, and different types of analyses have varying sensitivity to these differing forms (Finney, Mitchell, Cronkite & Moos, 1984). For example, use of the standard multiplicative product term found in most regression analyses assumes that increases in support result in uniform, monotonic increases in the protective effect of

support. Thus, if number of close friends were the support measure, use of a multiplicative product term would imply that the increase in buffering afforded by moving from no friends to one friend would be the same as that afforded by moving from 12 friends to 13 friends. It seems equally plausible to suggest that changes from low to moderate levels of support might have more of an effect than changes from moderate to high levels of support.

Thus, the stress-buffering hypothesis is less a specific hypothesis than it is a metatheoretical orientation toward stress-support-functioning relationships that encompasses a whole range of specific, varied, and sometimes conflicting hypotheses. Specification of the form of the relationship, whether it is linear or whether there are "threshhold effects", has important practical implications. For example, program planners must decide how "lacking" in social support an individual must be in order to be categorized as "at risk". Similarly, how much support is "enough" before an individual can be considered to be "protected", so that program resources can be diverted from one target individual to another? Such questions should compel researchers to become more conceptually precise in specifying the nature of stress-support-functioning relationships.

2.) How does the buffering process unfold over time? Cross-sectional studies of support invariably end with calls for longitudinal analyses to tease out causal directions in stress-support-functioning relationships. However, the time frame one chooses should be based upon one's theoretical notions as to the unfolding of the causal processes at work. How is stress conceptualized as influencing psychological functioning, and are support and functioning assessed at time periods that are likely to highlight the protective effects of support? Although support studies have examined

buffering effects across time spans ranging from 1 to 3 years (e.g., Dean & Ensel, 1982; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981), there seems to be little theoretical justification as to why particular time frames are used in particular studies.

3.) How are stress, support, and coping interrelated? Investigators are just beginning to examine what kinds of coping requirements are made by different types of stressors, and whether the types and sources of support need to be related to the task with which the individual is trying to cope (e.g., Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Heller & Swindle, 1983). For example, Bankoff (1983) examined whether support processes varied across stages of bereavement. For women in early stages of bereavement, support from family members had a positive impact on well-being. In contrast, support from a much wider range of sources (i.e., widowed friends; neighbors) was salient in a later transition phase when women were faced with the task of reorganizing their lives as single persons. Thus, investigators need to consider developmental processes in the stressful phenomenon at hand that may influence the links between stress, support, and functioning.

TOWARD A BROADER CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Resolution of these and other methodological issues is likely to go a long way towards resolving some of the inconsistencies in the support literature mentioned earlier. However, there are some implicit conceptual biases in the social support literature that will continue to limit its focus, and to restrict its utility for the design of supportive interventions. A more enriched understanding of the role of social support requires a paradigm shift that will expand the range of questions we are asking. The preponderance of current studies have linked deficits in social

support and coping to individual distress, but have not examined the broader social context out of which such stress, coping, and support processes emerge (Mitchell, Billings, & Moos, 1982). Although we are increasingly able to document the deleterious effects of deficits in support, there has been little study of the determinants of such patterns: What are the characteristics of environments and social systems that are likely to promote the development of supportive social ties? What are the personal and environmental contexts that characterize individuals who are effective in establishing a supportive social system?

Drawing on the work of Kelly (1977) and Trickett (Trickett, Kelly, & Vincent, in press), I would like to argue that an ecological perspective presents a conceptual framework that broadens and expands our thinking about social support beyond the stress-buffering paradigm. Such an ecological perspective can help redirect the focus of our research on social support in useful ways. First, persons and environments are seen as interdependent resources that create varied conditions for the expression of social support. The task becomes one of trying to understand how personal, environmental, and situational factors operate together to influence the help-seeking/help-giving strategies that are chosen by individuals, as well as the patterns of social support that emerge within groups or organizations. Second, an interest in adaptation and change over time is emphasized, thereby directing attention to how support and coping repertoires are "expressed, elaborated, and sustained" over the life of both the individual and the system of which he or she is a part. (Kelly, 1977). One becomes oriented toward examining the broader positive and negative consequences of particular support patterns.

BROADER LOOK AT THE SHORT AND LONG TERM EFFECTS OF SUPPORT PATTERNS

1.) An ecological perspective reshapes our questions about the effects of support by, first, focussing on the impact of support patterns upon prosocial behaviors as well as upon psychological distress. For example, Edmundson and her colleagues describe a support-oriented program with psychiatric clients in which they try to develop network-building skills as well as provide immediate support (Edmundson, Bedell, Archer & Gordon, 1982). The stress-buffer paradigm would lead one to ask only whether levels of psychopathology and rates of rehospitalization were lower among those with high support. The ecological paradigm would suggest an additional set of questions: To what extent have these individuals learned additional skills relevant to the initiation and maintenance of supportive relationships? Have the social network structures of these individuals changed in ways that make it more likely that some of their newly developed relationships will be maintained once their involvement with the program is ended? If we think of social ties as a resource that needs to be sustained and renewed, what consequences do particular supportive exchanges have for the person's ability to develop, sustain, and seek help from his/her social network in the future (e.g., Hirsch, 1981)? The manner in which skills and attitudes regarding network use are influenced now may determine whether the individual has support available to him/her at a later point in time.

2.) A second question raised by an ecological approach is what are the costs and consequences associated with particular helping exchanges for those other than the recipient. For example, service providers are encouraging family members to play a greater role in providing support for such groups as deinstitutionalized individuals and aged dependent relatives. In such cases, the provision of support may buffer the recipient but entail

considerable costs for the caregiver. Lelle (1982) suggests that the burden of caregiving in our society falls predominantly on women, who are typically responsible for providing support for young children, for children and adults with physical and emotional handicaps, for aged and dependent parents, and so on. In such cases, they may become involved in increasing numbers of nonreciprocal, stressful relationships. In fact, Kessler and his colleagues present data suggesting that life events may have more adverse effects on women than men precisely because of the former's greater involvement in caregiving activities (Kessler, McLeod, & Wethington, 1983). Thus, it is important to examine what the effects of a support giving exchange will be on both the recipient and the provider over the long run.

3.) Third, an ecological paradigm directs attention to the systemic consequences of support patterns. How do particular support exchanges influence the likelihood that support processes will be maintained over time? Although a professional's intervention and association with a self-help group may provide immediate benefit and support to the members, it may be done in ways that undermine the capacity of the group to maintain itself over time without such assistance (Gottlieb, 1983b). If we are develop preventive interventions that can promote self-sustaining supportive processes, we must become more sensitive to the systemic as well as the dyadic nature of support exchanges.

SOCIAL AND PERSONAL CONTEXT OF SUPPORT

Fourth, for those interested in the determinants of social support, an ecological orientation suggests the following questions: How do institutions and social systems promote the development of particular social network patterns, influence the availability of social support, and socialize individuals to adopt particular attitudes toward reliance on those

around them? Conversely, how do personal characteristics influence the degree to which individuals utilize the social resources that are potentially available to them? Such questions have led Dr. Christine Hodson and I to expand the focus of our work on domestic violence. In addition to examining the effects of social support on the psychological health of battered women, we also explored the personal and environmental factors which influenced the degree to which women were or were not likely to receive help from friends in dealing with their abusive relationships (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Mitchell & Hodson, in press). We found that the availability of specific forms of help-giving by friends seemed to be associated with a number of contextual variables (e.g., level of violence in the relationship; overlap in the couple's social networks; personal resources of the woman; etc). Similarly, the work of Felner, Warren, and others suggests that institutions and settings have social climates that can promote or discourage the development of various patterns of supportive relationships (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982; Warren, 1978). Thus, we need to learn more about how varied environmental conditions affect the expression of social support for both the individual and the organization.

CONCLUSION

It has been said that the mark of a good philosophy is not whether it provides us with the ultimate answers, but whether it leaves us with a more useful set of questions. One can take a similar stance in viewing the current status of the social support field. The current inconsistencies in the literature can spur us on not only towards greater methodological sophistication in answering our original questions about the stress-buffering effects of support, but also towards a richer and more complex set

of questions about the development and utilization of social relationships. I believe that research and practice alike could benefit from a conceptual shift in the social support field away from a narrow focus solely on the buffering effect of support on individuals; instead, an ecological perspective can orient us toward the additional questions of: (a) how persons and settings interact to create varied opportunities for the development of social network patterns, and to influence the development of expectations and skills regarding the utilization of support, and (b) how different support and help-giving patterns have varied implications for the long-term adaptation and survival of both the individual and the systems of which he/she is a part. Such questions go "beyond" the stress-buffering hypothesis, but are likely to provide us with a richer understanding of the role of support in the process of adaptation.

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