Article

Perceptions of Social Support in Urban At-Risk Boys and Girls

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Abstract: *This study explored at-risk boys' and girls' self-perceived social support. Participants were 141 female and 310 male, 8- to 12-year-olds from low-income neighborhoods; 54% of the sample is Latino. Using items from the four subscales of Harter's (1985) Social Support Scale for Children, factor analysis was used to explore differences in the underlying structure of social support. Analyses were performed separately for boys and girls. Analyses for girls' social support clearly reflected the four support types: close friend, family, classmate, and teacher. Boys did not reflect distinct types of support, indicating more similarity in their perceived social support from different people.*

Introduction

There is a growing awareness that the development of positive outcomes varies due to context of development, culture, and gender (Ungar et al., 2007). Social support is an essential component of healthy development and must be understood in the contexts young people experience it (Coatsworth et al., 2000). This study will explore the meanings of social support for boys and girls from an urban community, contributing to the understanding of gender and social support in the development of resilience.

Resilience Theoretical Approach

Research related to the development of minority and children at risk for poor outcomes due to low socioeconomic status has typically focused on deficits; however, an approach that examines the resilience process and positive development is favored (Meece & Kurtz-Costes, 2001). Researchers typically define resilience as a process that results in positive outcomes or adaptation for children or adolescents who have experienced adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). For populations with many risk factors associated with poor development, Masten (2001) explains that the processes that are related to *positive* outcomes are not extraordinary.

> Resilience appears to be a common phenomenon that results in most cases from the operation of basic human adaptational systems. If those systems are protected and in good working order, development is robust even in the face of severe adversity; if these systems are impaired, antecedent or consequent to adversity, then the risk for developmental problems is much greater, particularly if the environmental hazards are prolonged. (p. 227)

Masten (2001) and many other researchers support a conceptualization of resilience as a *process*, not a state of being or personality trait. Therefore, resilience research should focus on understanding the processes that enable children with many risk factors to achieve specific positive outcomes.

Social support is one of the crucial components of the resilience process and various scales maintain this. Positive relationships with peers and other people in the community and effective parenting are integral to human adaptational systems that contribute to resilience in children who experience adversity during development (Masten, 2001). Therefore, it is not surprising that children with many risk factors who have positive development often have certain family characteristics: close relationships with parent, authoritative parenting style, and relationships with extended family (Prevatt, 2003). Social support from teachers can have a positive impact on at-risk children. Nettles, Mucherah, and Jones (2000) found that elementary students from a high-risk, violent neighborhood who feel support from their teacher had higher math achievement and experience fewer effects from stressful life events. Peers are also an important resource for children and adolescents with many risk factors in reducing externalizing behaviors, and promoting higher achievement and other positive outcomes (Luthar, 2006).

Social support promotes the development of confidence in abilities and strengthens the skills that contribute to competence in their environment. Children who have greater emotional and instrumental support develop greater competence as adolescents (Wills, Blechman, & McNamara, 1996). The initial and most proximal source of social support is family. Parents are naturally in a position to support their children and nurture their development (Coatsworth et al., 2000). The role of peers increases throughout childhood and into adolescence (Blyth & Trager, 1988; Furman,

1989). Many positive effects are linked to relationships with peers. For example, children with positive, prosocial friendships tend to have higher achievement, IQ, self-worth, and mental health (Masten & Coatsworth 1995; 1998). Teacher support also is an important factor for positive development. In one study, students who reported higher teacher support (had teachers who were role models, helped with schoolwork and problems, and who cared) were less likely to use drugs, have friends who used drugs, and had fewer depressive symptoms (LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008).

The assessment of perceived social support has important differences depending on contexts, including cultural and developmental (Procidano & Smith, 1997). Young people from poor neighborhoods encounter different developmental contexts from their middle-class peers, therefore the definition of competence or adjustment is different (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). As Felner (2005) summarized: "For students in poverty, the skills and interaction styles required to be adaptive in an inner-city environment where safety may be an issue, when applied to a school setting, can be maladaptive or irrelevant" (p. 141).

Gender and Social Support

Because of the importance of understanding social support in resilience, it is essential to consider gender differences and similarities. Boys' and girls' different patterns of relationships with friends, family, and teachers must be considered when attempting to understand the role of social support in adjustment. Several studies have found gender differences in social support from friends (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990; Masten & Coatsworth, 1995; Way & Pahl, 2001); teachers (Reimer, 2002); and parents (Liu, 2008). However, much understanding of gender differences compares mean differences in measures (i.e., girls report significantly more parent support). Hussong (2000) found structural differences in intimacy and peer control for boys and girls, indicating that a more complete understanding of gender and social support should also take this approach.

A number of research studies using both quantitative and qualitative methods have highlighted numerous differences in the relationships of adolescent boys and girls, and a majority of this research is from middle-class samples, generally non-minorities (Way, 2004; Way, Cowal, Gingold, Pahl, & Bissessar, 2001). There is a need for understanding differences and similarities of low-income and minority young people. Many studies of protective factors, including social support, have not looked specifically at differences and similarities in girls' and boys' experiences (Wyman, 2003).

The Current Study

The literature demonstrates some important gender differences in levels of some types of social support and the relationship with positive outcomes. However, we know little about how at-risk young people think about social support and whether current models of social support—created with middle-class samples—are representative of low-SES and ethnically diverse populations. As an important aspect of the resilience process, understanding differences in how boys and girls perceive social support is important. This study will focus on two research questions:

1. Are there differences in the structure of perceived social support from different people for boys and girls from poor, urban neighborhoods?
2. How does this compare to the structure of perceived social support from the populations used to create the scale?

We hypothesize that there will be gender differences in the structure of friend and classmate support and similarities in parent support.

Method

Sample

Participants were recruited from five Boys and Girls Clubs in the Denver metropolitan area using a non-probability sampling method. Boys and Girls Clubs serve children from low-income families with the goal of improving developmental outcomes. Four of the five clubs are located in neighborhoods with a variety of problems: high crime rates, poverty, unemployment, and school dropouts (Piton Foundation, September 1993).

Participation in the study was voluntary. Children took home consent forms (written in both English and Spanish) to be signed by a parent or guardian. Those who returned the consent forms and were present on the day of the survey administration were included in the study. All of the students provided verbal and written assent. Participants were given the option of taking the survey in Spanish, but none did. Participants were given a soda after they finished completing the questions.

The final number of participants included 141 females and 310 males (14 were excluded due to missing data). The inordinate number of boys was a result of the club only recently accepting girls into the program. Age ranged from 8- to 12-years-old and the mean age of participants was 10.93 years (SD = 2.23). The average age of girls was 11.2 (SD = 1.92) and the average age for boys was 10.8 (SD = 1.77). The average grade in school was 5.43 (SD = 1.85), and was 5.3 for boys and 5.7 for girls. The participants were 54.2% Latino, 18.5% White, 9.6% African American, 5.8% American Indian, and 5.6% of mixed ethnicity.

Measures

Demographics. The demographic questionnaire asked participants to report age, gender, grade in school, family structure, neighborhood, self-reported grades, ethnicity, and involvement in youth organizations.

Social Support. Participants completed Harter's (1985) Social Support Scale for Children (SSSC). This questionnaire measures the support and positive regard children feel they receive from the people in their lives. The items determine the degree the children feel others treat them like people, care about them, are liked, understand them, and help with problems. The measure has 24 questions and four subscales, each focused on different categories of people: (a) parents, (b) teachers, (c) classmates, and (d) close friends. According to Harter (1985), validity was established by correlations between each subscale and a measure of global self-worth (r = .28 to r = .46). Strong internal reliability was also found for each subscale (α = .77 to α = .88). Several samples, from grades 3 through 8, were used to test this measure. All

were from middle-class neighborhoods in Colorado and 90% were European American.

The question format first asks the child to choose between descriptions of two kinds of kids. For example, "Some kids have parents who treat their child like a person who really matters BUT other kids have parents who *don't* usually treat their child like a person who really matters." Once they have chosen which description is like them, they are instructed to check one of two boxes: *really true for me* or *sort of true for me*.

Results

Analyses

Boys' and girls' data were examined separately in this study. To explore gender differences in perceptions of social support, separate principal axis factor analysis with varimax rotation calculations were performed to look at the underlying structure. Orthogonal rotation maximizes the differences and is likely to result in simple structure 85% of the time, and the factors are not correlated (Thompson, 2004). When Harter (1985) used factor analysis to develop the SSSC, she used oblique rotation, to allow factors to intercorrelate. Oblique is often used when orthogonal rotation does not achieve simple structure (Thompson, 2004). This study hoped to find distinct factors and simple structure for each gender, so orthogonal rotation was appropriate.

Boys' Social Support

The factor analysis for boys' social support did not conform to Harter's (1985) four-factor model. Six factors were identified with eigenvalues over 1. Factor five only consisted of two items and Factor six only included items that loaded higher on other factors, so four of the six factors were interpretable. Table 1 lists the items and factor scores.

Girls' Social Support

Factor analysis for girls' social support closely reflected Harter's factor model with four types of social support. Factor one only had Friend items, Factor two Teacher, Factor three Parent, and Factor four Classmate. Factor five consisted of the only three items that did not load as expected, one of which had a nearly equal cross-loading putting the item with the other Teacher support items. Table 2 outlines these analyses. The differences between the factor analysis for girls' social support and Harter's model were not large. Table 3 summarizes the factors for both boys and girls.

Discussion

Factor analysis of the boys' social support items revealed the scales were not consistent with Harter's model. The first factor consists of items from all of the different social support scales, indicating boys' social support has a general quality. This means that a boy might feel support in general (or lack of support) but does not always distinguish between different people in his life. Boys in this sample might also view their social support differently from the samples the original scales were based on. Way and Chen (2000) found working-class, minority boys who had supportive friendships were more likely to have supportive families as well, a link which was not true for girls. This could mean that boys in this sample who had supportive families were likely to also have supportive friends and school ties, and similarly boys who are lacking supportive families also lack other supportive relationships. This is important because there is a hope that supportive friendships and relationships with other adults can make up for unsupportive families (Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999); the results of this study indicate this may not be true for boys.

The second factor shows boys clearly see friends and classmates as providing the same kind of support. Harter (1985) found a similar pattern of combined classmate and friend support with elementary age children; however, she did not explore gender differences. Possibly when boys answer the questions about classmates, they limit their thinking to their friends in the class. But boys also are more likely to associate with large groups of other boys, rather than having a smaller group of close friends, as is common among girls (Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990). As suggested by other researchers (Hill & Lynch, 1983), perhaps boys' friendships are more similar to the friendships of girls who are younger, in that they are less intimate. Another explanation is that boys who have supportive close friends may also have supportive classmates, which would cause those items to factor similarly.

The girls' factor analysis of social support nearly matches the original model. Consistent with Harter's model, this suggests that girls see their social support as being differentiated. This means girls can have a supportive family while other relationships are not supportive. Girls may also find it easier than boys to make up for an unsupportive family with supportive friendships. Girls very clearly distinguished friends from classmates, a distinction boys did not make. Girls might be more likely to look outside their classroom to make friends. The girls in this sample show fewer differences than the boys compared to middle-class samples used to create the measure. Similar distinctions between different types of social support were found in Dutch adolescents by Helsen, Vollebergh, and Meeus (2000) who determined parent and friend support were related but independent systems.

More boys than girls participated in this study, and this could indicate differences in the population that are reflected in the results. As voluntary members of Boys and Girls Clubs, there could be reasons for the greater involvement of boys. The differences in numbers of boys and girls also make direct statistical comparisons difficult, necessitating the separate analyses done here. The results of this study are not necessarily generalizable to populations of different ages, from different kinds of neighborhoods, or from rural areas.

The results of this study have important implications for future resilience research and interventions with youth from poor neighborhoods with many risk factors associated with poor outcomes. Girls might make up for unsupportive relationships with other relationships, while boys may not. Social support is an important aspect of the resilience process leading to positive outcomes and it might be more difficult for boys to establish support. As Masten (2001) phrased it, social support is a basic system of adaptation and

> Efforts to promote competence and resilience in children at risk should focus on strategies that protect or restore the efficacy of these basic systems. Resilience models and findings also suggest that programs will be most effective when they tap these basic but powerful systems. (p. 235)

Table 1

Social Support: Boys' Factor Loadings and Rotated Factors

Item	Factor Loading					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Spend recess with their classmates (C)	**.620**					
Have parents who do listen to their children's problems (P)	**.617**					
Don't have classmates who make fun of them (C)	**.528**					
Have parents who really do understand them (P)	**.527**					
Often get asked to play in games by their classmates (C)	**.518**				.346	
Have a teacher who cares if they feel bad (T)	**.455**		.434			.385
Have parents who do act like what their children do is important (P)	**.409**					
Have a close friend who cares about their feelings (F)	**.393**				.391	.378
Have a teacher who is fair to them (T)	**.365**		.332			.315
Have classmates they can become friends with (C)		**.590**				
Have classmates who pay attention to what they say (C)		**.581**				
Have a close friend they can talk to about things that bother them (F)		**.565**			.480	
Have classmates who like them the way they are (C)		**.545**				
Have a close friend who really understands them (F)		**.507**				
Have a close friend who they can tell their problems to (F)		**.407**			.330	
Have a teacher who helps them if upset and have a problem (T)			**.762**			
Have a teacher who cares about them (T)			**.679**			
Have a teacher who treats them like a person (T)			**.517**	310		
Have a teacher who helps them do their best (T)			**.409**	.	.424	.329
Have parents who like them the way they are (P)				**.702**		.
Have parents who treat their children like a person who really matters (P)				**.643**		
Have parents who care about their feelings (P)				**.479**		
Have a close friend who they like to spend time with (F)					**.599**	
Have a close friend who really listens to what they say (F)					**.481**	
Percent of variance explained	11.5%	9.0%	8.8%	6.9%	6.6%	

Factor loadings < .3 are left blank. C = Classmate; P = Parent; F = Friend; T = Teacher

Table 2

Social Support Girls' Factor Loadings and Rotated Factors

Item	Factor Loading					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Have a close friend who really listens to what they say (F)	**.718**					
Have a close friend who they like to spend time with (F)	**.714**		.311	.354		
Have a close friend they can talk to about things that bother them (F)	**.679**					
Have a close friend who they can tell their problems to (F)	**.658**					
Have a close friend who really understands them (F)	**.616**				.304	
Have a close friend who cares about their feelings (F)	**.601**					
Have a teacher who cares if they feel bad (T)		**.747**				
Have a teacher who is fair to them (T)		**.747**				
Have a teacher who cares about them (T)		**.604**			.336	
Have a teacher who helps them if they are upset and have a problem (T)		**.601**				
Have a teacher who helps them do their best (T)		**.577**				
Have parents who do listen to their children's problems (P)			**.657**			
Have parents who like them the way they are (P)			**.656**			
Have parents who treat their children like a person who really matters (P)			**.630**			
Have parents who care about their feelings (P)			**.613**			.516
Have parents who really do understand them (P)			**.596**			
Have parents who do act like what their children do is important (P)			**.593**			
Often get asked to play in games by their classmates (C)				**.646**		
Don't have classmates who make fun of them (C)				**.568**	.311	
Spend recess with their classmates (C)	.321			**.504**		
Have classmates who pay attention to what they say (C)				**.466**		
Have classmates who like them the way they are (C)					**.734**	
Have classmates they can become friends with (C)	.371				**.477**	
Have a teacher who treats them like a person (T)		394		.367	**.404**	
Percent of variance explained	13.9%	11.6%	11.3%	8.4%	6.3%	3%

Factor loadings < .3 are left blank. C = Classmate; P = Parent; F = Friend; T = Teacher

Table 3

Social Support Factors

Boys	
Factor 1	General Social Support (3 Classmate items, 3 Parent, 2 Teacher, 1 Friend)
Factor 2	Friend/Classmate Support (3 Classmate items, 3 Friend)
Factor 3	Teacher Support (4 Teacher items)
Factor 4	Parent Support (3 Parent items)
Girls	
Factor 1	Close Friend Support (6 Friend items)
Factor 2	Teacher Support (5 Teacher items)
Factor 3	Parent Support (6 Parent items)
Factor 4	Classmate Support (4 Classmate items)

Note. Only the first 4 factors are included.

Luthar (2006) describes many programs aimed at improving parenting, friendships, and relationships with teachers to promote resilience and positive outcomes. However, these programs need to consider the differences between boys' and girls' experiences of social support.

Future Directions

Further research should investigate why boys show less differentiation between different types of social support. Family has a strong influence on other forms of support, so understanding how this works for boys and girls might be a direction to explore. It is possible that there is a bidirectional effect in social support—that boys and girls might solicit (or do not) support differently. The boys and girls in this study were from poor urban neighborhoods and it would be useful to investigate if boys and girls from other developmental contexts show similar structure in social support.

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