THE ROLE OF VARIOUS SOCIAL SUPPORT VARIABLES ON TURKISH CHILDREN'S ANXIETY LEVEL

FÜSUN AKKÖK
OYA GÜNERI
GÜNSELI ORAL
ZEYNEP (HATIPOĞLU) SÜMER

Abstract - *This study investigated the role of various social support variables on the state and trait anxiety levels of elementary school children. The subjects were 196 4th and 5th graders. The data were collected by the Social Support Form, State Anxiety Inventory, and Trait Anxiety Inventory. Results revealed a significant effect of living together with parents on state and trait anxiety levels. Furthermore, a positive correlation between state anxiety and love and affection for the teacher was explored. No significant difference on the state and trait anxiety levels of children was another finding of the study. The effects of the nature and continuity of home and school environments on the anxiety levels of children were discussed in relation to these variables.*

Introduction

S tress and anxiety are not only adult phenomena. Children are also exposed to stressful situations that might affect their psychological and social states. Students experience stress in different situations, they may vary in their ability to control their emotions, and they experience more anxiety in problematic academic situations than in social conflict situations (Boekaerts 1993). It is known that, in addition to other factors, a highly competitive academic environment, peer relations, or teacher-student relations, may lead to an increase in children's level of anxiety. Recent discussions of stress have emphasised the role of social support which has frequently been defined as the existence of availability of people with whom one can associate and on whom one can rely, as a potential moderator of the impact of stress. According to Barrera (1986), social support encompasses perceived support, social embeddedness and enacted support. From this perspective, people who believe that they belong to a social network of communication and mutual obligation experience social support. It is possible that social support facilitates coping with stress, anxiety and adaptational change, and its absence or withdrawal may have a negative effect on the individual (Sarason 1981).

Cohen and Wills (1985) described two models that illustrate possible roles

played by social support, as well as the specific aspect of social support, likely to be involved in each model. These models are the main effect model and the buffering model. The main effect model suggests that social support produces a generalised positive effect on the individual, regardless of the level of stress. The second model, the buffering model, suggests that social support interacts with stress such that high levels of social support moderate the negative effects of stress on adjustment.

Several pieces of research show that certain types of social ties (social support) may have a protective, stress buffering effect and that their effect may be more important for some individuals than for others (Sarason 1981). Bowlby (1969, 1973), after an extensive literature review, concluded that human beings of all ages are at their happiest and most effective when they are confident that they have trusted people behind them who will come to their aid when difficulties arise. Such trusted people provide a secure base from which to operate and constitute social support for the individual.

Attachment theories have argued that the nature of children's bonding with their parents has a significant impact on their adjustment throughout adult life, affecting ease of socialisation and susceptibility to anxiety and depression (Bowlby 1969). Specifically, children with secure, caring attachments to their parents are more likely to have secure relationships as adults. Wagner, Cohen, and Brooke (1990) reported that a perceived warm relationship with the mother insulated the adolescent from negative reactions to stress. Furthermore, Shell, Roosa, and Eysenberg (1991) reported that 10 year-olds' perceptions of maternal warmth were related to problem-focused coping and the use of social support. Korkut (1996), in a study conducted with high school students, found that when family relations in Turkey were examined, parent-child relations appeared to be more important determinants in reducing anxiety and developing communication skills than sibling relations.

Sarason (1981) concluded that the problem of anxiety is, to a significant extent, a problem of interfering in cognition and direction of attention. Individuals' self-preoccupying thoughts may interfere with attention to the environment and to the task that must be dealt with. Therefore, social support may be effective because the presence of an interested other shakes the individual's assumption that he or she must face a challenge alone. The belief that others have similar interests and concerns and that help is available may contribute to the extinction of anxiety. Although not especially concerned with performance, Schachter (1959) suggested that social affiliation had anxiety reducing effects.

It is strange that social support has been extensively studied in adult populations, but only scarce data are available on the effect of children's social support, especially when they are faced with anxiety provoking situations such

as a competitive school environment, peer relations, or teacher-student relations. There are gender differences in the use of social support to reduce anxiety in such situations, but the literature is not very consistent on this issue. Studies carried out in some European countries (Rauste-Von Wright 1987; Seiffe-Krenke, 1990) reported that girls in early adolescence more often try to find social support to cope with difficulties than boys, whereas boys are more likely to try to manage by themselves.

The quality and quantity of relationships with other people moderate responses to stress and anxiety, and influence health and adjustment. This has stimulated researchers to investigate the characteristics of social support. In the light of the existing literature, family support, as a form of social support, is perceived as an important variable. However, investigators have found that children distinguish among various sources of support, and because of this, there is a need to examine these sources separately. The purpose of the present study is therefore to investigate the relationship of various social support variables on the state and trait anxiety level of elementary school children.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of the present study were 196 students, aged 10-11 (99 girls, 97 boys). These were 85 4th and 111 5th grade students who were selected from the primary schools located in middle class regions of Ankara, Turkey.

Instruments

a) *Social Support Form (SSF):* The SSF was developed by researchers in order to provide information from social resources related to family and relatives, friends and school. SSF items consisted of questions including number of visits to relatives, number of friends liked and relations to the class teacher.

b) *State Anxiety Inventory (SAI):* The SAI included twenty items about children's feelings at the particular time when the inventory was delivered. The SAI was composed of a three point-Likert type scale (never, sometimes, frequently) developed by Spielberger (1973) and adapted to Turkish culture by Özusta (1993). Test- retest reliability for males was .65, $p < .001$, for females .53, $p < .001$, and .60, $p < .001$ for the whole group. The internal consistency of the inventory was assessed by Cronbach alpha, and the alpha coefficient for the total scale was .82.

c) *Trait Anxiety Inventory (TAI):* The TAI included twenty items about how children feel generally. Similar to the SAI, the TAI also included a 3 point Likert type (never, sometimes, frequently) scale developed by Spielberger (1973), and adapted to Turkish culture by Özusta (1993). Test-retest reliability for males was .74, $p < .001$, for females .48, $p < .001$, and .65, $p < .001$ for the whole group. The internal consistency of the inventory was assessed by Cronbach alpha, and the alpha coefficient for the total scale was .81.

Procedure

Subjects were presented with three scales: The Social Support Form, the State Anxiety Inventory and the Trait Anxiety Inventory. The subjects were asked to fill out the inventories which were given simultaneously.

Results and discussion

In this study, social support is assessed in a variety of social spheres. The three inventories were given to the 4th and 5th graders on scheduled days, specified by the school principals. MANOVA and Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient were conducted as statistical analyses. Findings revealed that living with both parents had a significant effect on both state and trait anxiety ($F = 4.98$, $p < .05$; $p = 5.92$, $p < .05$, respectively). The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient indicated a negative significant correlation between living with both mother and father, and state-trait anxiety ($r = -.16$, , $p < .05$; $r = -.17$, $p < .05$, respectively). This reveals that children who live with both parents have lower levels of state and trait anxiety.

However, the results of MANOVA did not indicate a significant effect of living together with grandparents on state-trait anxiety of children ($F = .027$, $p > .05$; $F = .016$, $p > .05$, respectively). Furthermore, frequency of visits to grandparents and close relatives had no significant effect on both types of anxiety. In addition to these findings, there exists a positive correlation between state anxiety and love and affection for the teacher ($r = .22$, $p < .05$), indicating that the more children love their teacher, the higher the state anxiety scores they have. This is an interesting finding that reflects teacher-student interaction in the Turkish educational system, which is based on conditional love on the side of the teacher. The system, which is achievement-oriented, encourages competition in the classroom, rather than cooperation and affection. Hence, children are oriented to be competitive and socially accepted and approved by their teachers by keeping their success at optimum level, and demonstrating good manners at school. Thus,

the love and affection that children have for their teacher can be thought of as the feeling of responsibility that the child feels for the teacher's good opinion of him or her. Aydyn (1992) claimed that 60.41% of girls and boys have high levels of test anxiety or performance anxiety depending on the factors above.

Another interesting finding of the present study was that gender had no significant effect on either the state or the trait anxiety scores. This finding seems to be inconsistent with the literature (Özusta 1993; Anderson, Williams, McGee & Silva 1987; Bell-Dolan, Last & Strauss 1990) which states that girls have higher levels of state and trait anxiety.

The results also indicated a significant correlation between state and trait anxiety of children. Consistent with the findings of Spielberger (1966), individuals with higher levels of trait anxiety tend to generalise this to other situations, and experience state anxiety at a more frequent level.

In conclusion, the findings of the present study reveal that mothers and fathers who live together are the primary sources of social support system for 4th and 5th grade children in Turkey. This may originate from the family structure in which the parents are the main source from whom children can receive help when solving problems. In other words, the family, and especially the mother, creates a shield which filters out external problems encountered by the child, and creates a safe and secure environment in the family. Perceiving the parents as warm, accepting and nurturing care givers promotes various aspects of mental health and psychosocial development. On the other hand, the positive correlation between love and affection for the teacher and state anxiety seems like a cultural variable, since the teachers' attitudes toward children are mostly authoritarian. The development of communication, speaking and listening skills among the teachers, students, and parents may also function as an important social support mechanism. It is possible that high levels of social support resources may be useful to children regardless of anxiety level by providing opportunities for stable positive experiences and the development of social skills.

Being aware of the fact that social support can reduce the children's state and trait anxiety levels is not enough for developing tactics to minimise stress at school. It is also considered that home experiences such as the time that parents spend at home, the quality of activities performed together with the parents, and the way that parents respond to their children, are important contributors to the nature of social support (Akkök, Askar & Sucuoglu 1995). When school and family relations are considered, it seems that family and social influences are usually interrelated (Edwards 1993). At school, the teacher's role in providing positive discipline and effective schooling is critical. In Turkey, discipline is mostly perceived as 'conformity to school rules and norms' (Günçer & Oral, 1993). This, in a way, demonstrates that there is a need for a well-planned,

individual approach to discipline on the side of the teachers, rather than giving priority to obedience and conformity as criteria of achievement, order and good manners which inhibit the development of self-esteem, creativity, and self- confidence.

Consistent with the findings about teacher-student interaction which is based on conditional love, it appears that not only the social support given at home, but also home and school interaction which are continuous, consistent and complementary in terms of unconditional positive regard are necessary; especially when one considers that Turkish elementary school children spend more time at school than at home, this necessity for building up a more intimate and loving environment through the interaction of home and school becomes vital.

Future research in this area might be strengthened by identifying those variables that might protect children from the impact of stressors and moderate the negative effects of stressful events. Furthermore, future research into children's social support might examine the specific functions performed by different support systems.

Füsun Akkök, Oya Güneri, Günseli Oral, and **Zeynep (Hatipoğlu) Sümer** *are all scholars working at the Middle East Technical University of Ankara, Turkey. The names of the authors are in alphabetical order. Requests for offprints should be sent to Professor Füsun Akkök, Middle East Technical University, Department of Educational Sciences, Ankara 06531- TURKEY. Fax: 0090.312.210.12.54. Email address: Fusun@rorqual.cc.metu.edu.tr*

References

Akkök, F., Askar,P., & Sucuoglu, B. (1995) Safe schools require the contributions of everybody: The picture of Turkey. *Thresholds in Education,* Vol.21, 29-34.

Anderson, J.C., Williams, S., McGee, R. & Silva, P.A. (1987) DSM 3 disorders in preadolescent children: Prevalence in a large sample from the general population. *Archives of General Psychiatry,* Vol.49, 69-76.

Aydyn, G. (1992) 1992 yyly anadolu lisesi giris synavynyn iptalinin ögrencilerin synav kaygysy düzeyine etkisi. *Egitim ve Bilim.* Vol.17, 37-45.

Barrera, M. (1986) Distinctions between social support concepts, measures, and models. *American Journal of Community Psychology,* Vol.14, 413-445.

Bell-Dolan, D.S., Last, G.C. & Strauss, C.C. (1990) Symptoms of anxiety disorders in normal children. *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescence Psychiatry,* Vol.29, 759-765.

Boekaerts, M. (1993) Being concerned with well-being and with learning. *Educational Psychologist*, Vol.28, 149-167.

Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1973) *Separation: Anxiety and Anger*. New York: Basic Books.

Cohen, S. & Wills, T.A. (1985) Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol.98, 310-357.

Edwards, C.H. (1993) *Classroom Discipline and Management*. New York: MacMillan.

Günçer, B., & Oral, G. (1993) Relationship between creativity and nonconformity to school discipline as perceived by teachers of Turkish elementary school children, by controlling for their grade and sex. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, Vol.20, 208-214.

Korkut, F. (1996) Some variables influencing the communication skills of high school students. Paper presented at the 3rd National Conference on Guidance and Counseling, Adana-Turkey. April 15-16.

Özusta, S. (1993). *Reliability and Validity study of State-trait anxiety inventory for Children*. Master Thesis, Hacettepe University, Ankara.

Rauste-Von Wright, M.(1987) *On the life process among Finnish adolescents: Summary report of a longitudinal study*. Helsinki, Finland: Societas Scientiorum Fennica.

Sarason, I.G., (1981) Test anxiety, stress, and social support. *Journal of Personality*, Vol.49(1), 100-114.

Schachter, S. (1959) *The Psychology of Affiliation*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Seiffe-Krenke, I. (1990) Health related behavior and coping with illness in adolescence: A cross cultural perspective. In L.R. Schmidt, P. Schwenkmezger, J. Weinman & S.Maes (Eds.) *Theoretical and Applied Aspects of Health Psychology*. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Shell, R.M., Roosa, M.W., & Eisenberg, N. (1991) Family and parent-child relationship influences on children's coping strategies. Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Seattle, WA.

Spielberger, D. (1966) Theory and research on anxiety. In C.D. Spielberger (Ed.) *Anxiety and Behavior*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Spielberger, D. (1973) *Manual for the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children*. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Wagner, B.M., Cohen, P. & Brooke, J.S. (1990) Parent-adolescent relationships as moderators of the effects of stressful life events during adolescence. Paper presented at the Biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, Atlanta, G.A.