

A SINGLE ITEM MEASURE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT: ASSOCIATIONS WITH WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

Background: A key component of well-being is social support. There are many questionnaires measuring social support and the present study examined the utility of a single question in a sample of secondary school students. **Methods:** Eighty-two secondary school students completed an online survey measuring well-being predictors and outcomes. The survey contained a four-item measure of social support from the Student Well-being Process Questionnaire (SWPQ) and a single item evaluating the components of social support. **Results:** The four social support questions from the SWPQ loaded on a single factor, and a total support score was used in the analyses. The single item and total support scores were significantly correlated and showed similar associations with well-being outcomes. Social support was generally associated with positive outcomes but not negative ones, except for depression. When established predictors of well-being were included in the analyses, the single-item social support measure remained significantly associated with positive well-being and flourishing but not life satisfaction or depression. Life satisfaction was related to psychological capital and depression with negative coping. **Conclusions:** A single-item social support question was associated with the four-item social support scale from the WPQ and showed the expected associations with well-being outcomes. This question can now be used in a shorter version of the WPQ.

KEYWORDS: Well-being; Students; Social support; Stressors; Negative coping; Psychological capital; Perceived stress; Negative well-being; Positive well-being; Life satisfaction; Depression.

INTRODUCTION

The Well-being Process Questionnaire^[1,2] was developed from the Demands Resources Individual Effects (DRIVE) stress model.^[3,4] A key variable in the DRIVE model was social support, and the measure used was taken from the Job Demands-Control-Support model.^[5] The Well-being Process model was initially used with occupational samples,^[6-30] and a single measure of social support was developed: “I feel that I am supported by my colleagues (for example there is a good atmosphere at work, I get along with my colleagues, my colleagues understand me).” This single item was highly correlated with longer measures of social support at work. A version of the WPQ was then developed for use with student samples.^[31-42] The measures of social support used in the Student WPQ were based on the Interpersonal Self-Evaluation List (ISEL),^[43] and four questions measured belonging support, esteem support, tangible support and problem-solving support. These questions were highly correlated, and a total social support score was used in most studies. The Well-being Process Questionnaire (WPQ) included more predictor

variables (e.g. psychological capital) and positive outcomes (happiness, life satisfaction and positive affect) than the DRIVE model. Recent studies have generally replicated the effects of the established predictors and added new outcome variables (e.g., flourishing and physical health) and predictors (e.g., workload, work-life balance, flow, and daytime sleepiness). Results obtained from university students have been replicated with samples from a secondary school.^[44-47]

One key approach in the development of the WPQ was using short scales or single items to assess the different concepts. This allowed the inclusion of many variables. The present study aimed to develop a single student social support question and examine its associations with the longer measure of the Student WPQ and with well-being outcomes.

METHODS

Ethical committee approval

The current study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the School of Psychology, Cardiff

University, all carried out with the informed consent of the participants. Volunteers were recruited from a secondary school in South Wales.

Participants

Eighty-two secondary school students (50% aged 12-13 years, 50% aged 13-14 years; 48.2% male) participated in the study.

Materials

Participants completed an online survey containing questions about social support, well-being and student lifestyle factors.

Social support

The original Student WPQ social support measures covered perceived esteem support, tangible support, belonging support and problem-solving support.

The actual questions were

Esteem support

I feel that I have the social support I need to enhance my self-esteem (For example: There is someone who will listen to me when I need to talk, there is someone who will give me good advice, there is someone who shows me love and affection)

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Agree

Tangible support

There is a person or people in my life who would provide tangible support for me when I need it (for example: money for tuition or books, use of their car, furniture for a new apartment).

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Agree

Belonging support

There is a person or people in my life who would provide me with a sense of belonging (for example: I could find someone to go to a movie with me, I often get invited to do things with other people, I regularly hang out with friends).

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Agree

Emotional support

There is a person or people in my life with whom I would feel perfectly comfortable discussing any problems I might have (for example: difficulties with my social life, getting along with my parents, sexual problems).

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Agree

Single-item social support question

I feel that I have the social support I need (e.g. people to talk to, support for financial needs, friendship, and someone to discuss problems with).

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Agree

Well-being questions.

The Short-form Well-Being Process Questionnaire (SFWPQ)^[45] was used. It comprised questions about

well-being predictors and measures of well-being outcomes.

Analysis strategy

Factor analyses were carried out on the four social support scales to determine if they loaded on a single factor. If this was the case, a total social support score would be used in subsequent analyses. Correlational analyses examined associations between the social support scale score(s) and the single-item measuring social support. Correlations between the social support measures and the well-being outcomes were then computed. Finally, a MANOVA, including the other established predictors of well-being, was carried out to determine which outcome variables were significantly associated with the single-item social support variable.

RESULTS

Factor analysis

The four social support subscales loaded on a single factor explaining 73.4% of the variance. The Cronbach alpha value for this single social support scale was 0.88. Table 1 shows the correlations between the total social support score, the single-item social support score, and the well-being outcomes. The two social support scores were significantly correlated and associated with the well-being outcomes in the predicted directions (significantly associated with positive outcomes, but not with negative outcomes except depression).

Table 1: Correlations (Pearson r) between the social support scores and well-being outcomes.

	Single-item social support	Total social support score
Total social support score	0.29 p < 0.01	
Positive well-being	0.40 p < 0.001	0.22 p < 0.05
Negative well-being	-0.14 p > 0.05	-0.07 p > 0.05
Perceived stress	-0.10 p > 0.05	-0.02 p > 0.05
Life satisfaction	0.31 p < 0.005	0.22 p < 0.05
Anxiety	-0.08 p > 0.05	-0.15 p > 0.05
Depression	-0.23 p < 0.05	-0.14 p > 0.05
Flourishing	0.39 p < 0.001	0.46 p < 0.001

A MANOVA was then carried out, including all the well-being outcomes, the single-item social support variable, and the established predictors of well-being. This analysis aimed to identify which associations with the social support score remained significant when the established predictors were covaried. The results from this analysis confirmed that the beneficial effects of social support were restricted to positive outcomes (positive well-being: $F_{1, 70} = 6.56$ p < 0.05; Flourishing: $F_{1, 70} = 4.86$ p < 0.05). The association between social support and life satisfaction was no longer significant, with Psychological capital being the significant predictor of life satisfaction ($F_{1, 70} = 11.64$ p < 0.001). The association between social support and depression was

no longer significant, with negative coping having a major impact on depression ($F(1, 70) = 7.84, p < 0.01$).

DISCUSSION

The well-being process model includes predictors of both positive (e.g. social support) and negative (e.g. stressors) well-being outcomes. These predictors and outcomes have to be measured using single questions to avoid fatigue when completing the survey. The present study reduced the measurement of student social support to a single question. This question was significantly correlated with the original WPQ social support score based on four questions. The single question was also significantly associated with positive well-being outcomes (positive well-being, flourishing, and life satisfaction). Social support was also negatively associated with depression, confirming previous findings. Multivariate analysis showed that social support was only significantly related to positive well-being and flourishing when other established predictors (stressors, negative coping and psychological capital) were included. Life satisfaction was significantly associated with psychological capital and depression with negative coping. Overall, these results show that student social support can be measured with a single question. The use of single questions means that many predictors and outcomes can be included in surveys. Further research is required to determine whether these results from a sample of secondary school students are obtained from different age groups (e.g., university students and workers).

CONCLUSION

There are many measures of social support and the present study used a single question in a sample of secondary school students. Eighty-two secondary school students completed an online survey measuring well-being. The survey contained a four-item measure of social support from the Student Well-being Process Questionnaire (SWPQ) and a single item evaluating the components of social support. The four social support questions from the SWPQ loaded on a single factor, and a total social support score was used in the analyses. The single-item social support measure and the total support score were significantly correlated and showed similar associations with the well-being outcomes. Social support was associated with positive outcomes (e.g. positive well-being, flourishing, and life satisfaction) but not negative ones (e.g. negative well-being, stress and anxiety), except for depression. When established predictors of well-being (psychological capital, stressors and negative coping) were included in the analyses, the single-item social support measure remained significantly associated with positive well-being and flourishing but not life satisfaction or depression. Life satisfaction was related to psychological capital and depression with negative coping. In summary, a single-item social support question was associated with the four-item social support scale from the student WPQ and showed the expected associations with well-being

outcomes. This question can now be used in a shorter version of the student WPQ.

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