Adolescent predictors of satisfaction with social support six years later: An Australian longitudinal study

Helen R. Winefield [a], [*], Paul H. Delfabbro [a], Anthony H. Winefield [a], [b], Tania Plueckhahn [a], Catia G. Malvaso [a]

[a] School of Psychology, University of Adelaide, South Australia, Australia
[b] School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia, South Australia, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The importance of socially supportive relationships in assisting people to cope with stress and adverse events is well recognised, but the trajectories whereby individuals develop the capacity to attract those supports have been infrequently studied. Taking advantage of a substantial longitudinal data set, we aimed to explore the precursors during mid-adolescence, of satisfaction with social supports in young adulthood. Both personality factors (extraversion, neuroticism) and adolescent experiences of high-quality interpersonal relationships with parents and peers were hypothesised to predict subsequent satisfactory supports; we wished to compare the influence of these factors. Participants in a study of the school to work transition (N = 558) provided psychosocial information at 16 −17 years of age and then again six years later at 23, using paper and online questionnaires and standardised measures. Personality and family climate variables both predicted adult social support, with family cohesiveness and neuroticism having the largest roles. The possible implications for mental health promotion are discussed.

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The importance of socially supportive relationships in assisting people to cope with stress and adverse events is well recognised, with numerous observational reports of the longitudinal connection between poor social supports and a range of adverse health and mental health outcomes (e.g. Berkman, 2000; Dunkel Schetter, 2011; Landstedt, Hammarström, & Winefield, 2015; Uchino, 2006). A meta-analysis by Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton (2010) concluded that the damaging effect of poor social relationships on mortality is at least as great as that of risk factors such as smoking and obesity. People who report satisfaction with affectionate and reciprocal relationships are functioning effectively in the social domain which is one component of well-being (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004; Ryff, 1989), while Cohen and Lemay (2007) convincingly described the possible mechanisms that explain the benefits of social support. However, the question of why some people report satisfaction with their close interpersonal relationships and others do not, is less frequently addressed. Individual differences in skills or expectations relevant to building supportive relationships with others, for example skills in providing and eliciting evidence of affection and care, probably arise through a variety of pathways. Given the benefits to health and well-being of adequate social supports, questions arise about how to foster satisfactory supports as a public health promoting intervention. To do so we need to understand more about the precursors of adequate support, with a focus on factors which are at least potentially, modifiable (Catalano et al., 2012).

* Corresponding author. School of Psychology, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia 5005, Australia.
E-mail address: helen.winefield@adelaide.edu.au (H.R. Winefield).

This paper reports analyses using a substantial longitudinal data set, which aim to elucidate predictors during adolescence of satisfying social support six years later in young adulthood, or emerging adulthood as Arnett (2007) refers to this period of life. At this developmental stage, ranging in age approximately from 18 to 25 years, young people today face the challenges of identity formation and educational and occupational preparation which Erikson (1950) described in his day as occurring in late adolescence. Young adulthood is a period of life now characterised by continuing education, financial dependence and identity exploration, with comparatively delayed commitment to marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2007; Sawyer et al., 2012). Social relationships are highly salient to young adults' success in their developmental challenges, and hence this paper explores the adolescent precursors of young adults' satisfaction with their available social support. Specifically we explored the relative contributions of several potential influences, including gender, personality factors, and experiences of high-quality interpersonal relationships both within the family and outside it.

Personality variables may be expected to predict adult satisfaction with social support and so may gender (Swickert & Owens, 2010). Classically the extraverted person enjoys and seeks social interaction and feels confident in being able to form positive relationships and attract friendships, while those scoring high in Neuroticism express anxiety and dissatisfaction about their interpersonal relationships (Huppert, 2009; Lahey, 2009; Suls & Martin, 2005). As behavioural patterns of this nature are established at an early age (Gale, Booth, Mõttus, Kuh, & Deary, 2013; Von Dras & Siegler, 1997), it is likely that Extraversion and Neuroticism scores could be reliable predictors of later satisfaction with social supports. Their relative influence however has not to our knowledge been investigated.

Other predictors to be considered involve early learning experiences of satisfying interpersonal relationships. Approaching the questions from a developmental perspective, Bowlby (1977) explained how early interactions between infants and their main caregivers mould the growing child's expectations about the social world. Evidence for continuity of attachment styles into adulthood is fairly well established (Fraley, 2002) leading to the prediction that early experiences of stable emotional bonds within the family will be associated with perceptions of adequate social support in adulthood. In support, Paradis et al. (2011) report that feeling highly valued as a family member and having a family confidant at age 15 both predicted adaptive adult functioning at age 30 in several domains including social and interpersonal functioning. Several pathways or mechanisms may be responsible for this continuity. One refers to the emotional consequences of deficient support from parents, for example depression, causing withdrawn or irritable behaviour that alienates potential sources of support. An illustrative study by Stice, Ragan, and Randall (2004) found that girls aged 11 to 15 who reported low support from *parents* were more likely to suffer depressive symptoms one to two years later, but that initial depression predicted decreased *peer* support at follow-up. Parents may also have roles as models for social skills building, which suggest another reason why conflict and low family cohesion may be associated with later social anxiety, avoidance and loneliness (Johnson, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2001).

By school age, peer relations gain influence on psychosocial adjustment. It seems likely that experiences of being socially isolated, marginalised, or bullied, may both contribute to and reflect dissatisfaction with the reliability and supportiveness of social relationships. For example, Segrin, Nevarez, Arroyo, and Harwood (2012) showed that parental loneliness, an uncommunicative family environment and a history of being bullied at school all predicted young adult loneliness (arguably a form of low satisfaction with social supports). The relative roles of parents and peers were studied by Helsen, Vollebergh, and Meeus (2000) who, in a large cross-sectional sample of 12–24 year olds found a complicated pattern of parental support being more closely related to wellbeing than was peer support, while strong peer support in the absence of parental support was associated with emotional problems.

Aims and hypotheses

The literature summarised above illustrates the diverse terms and conceptual frameworks (including social support, attachment, loneliness, and social isolation) which have been applied in studies of the psychosocial development process from adolescence to early adulthood. Although research is necessarily descriptive rather than experimental, there remain somewhat surprising gaps in our understanding of how to foster the perception of being loved and valued within reciprocal relationships – here summarised as satisfactory social support – which is so emotionally sustaining in times of challenge. This paper therefore aims to examine the following potential longitudinal predictors in mid-adolescence, of satisfactory social support in young adulthood: extraverted or neurotic personality, and reliable supportive relationships with family and peers. We examined these longitudinally in a representative sample of adolescents who remained as participants in the research project over six annual waves of data collection, using hierarchical mixed methods modelling to explore the relative contributions of predictors entered in an order reflecting their relative modifiability. The lack of multivariate longitudinal studies in representative samples prevented us from forming exact hypotheses about the relative contributions of different aspects of personality and of parental and peer relations.

Method

Participants

The data for this study were drawn from a 10-year longitudinal study undertaken in South Australia between 2001 and 2012 initially involving 2552 (M = 1041, F = 1485, 26 missing gender data) secondary school students with a mean age of 15.2 years (*SD* = .50). At recruitment students attended a representative sample of 35 government and private, rural and