



Assessing social support among South Asians: The multidimensional scale of perceived social support

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ABSTRACT

The psychometric properties of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) of the Urdu (MSPSS-U) and Nepali (MSPSS-N) versions were investigated among Pakistani ($n = 148$) and Nepalese ($n = 153$) respondents living in Hong Kong. The factor analysis of the MSPSS-N conducted in this study confirmed the three factors of the original MSPSS, namely, Family, Friend, and Significant Others, while only two factors were extracted from the MSPSS-U (i.e., the Family and Friends subscales). With regard to construct validity, both the MSPSS-U and MSPSS-N were inversely correlated with depression, anxiety and stress as assessed by the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21). The internal reliability and construct validity of the MSPSS-U and MSPSS-N were also established and provided support for the validity of both versions as tools for measuring perceived social support among South Asian migrants.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years there has been great interest in the role of social support as a mechanism for the maintenance of psychological well-being under conditions of stress. Social support is a multifaceted construct and a review of the literature indicates that the construct of social support consists of both a *structural* and a *functional* component (Goebert and Loue, 2009). The structural component includes informal and formal support, such as an individual's social network (Hirsh, 1981), the size of the social network, frequency of contact with members of the network, reciprocal support and quality of the support (Canty-Mitchell and Zimet, 2000). Functional support refers to the perceived level of the support received, such as emotional support, affirmative support and tangible support (House and Kahn, 1985; Kahn and Antonucci, 1980). These two concepts of social support can be broadly distinguished in terms of received and perceived support.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in examining the role of social support during the acculturation process (Choi and Thomas, 2009; Miranda and Matheny, 2000; Stone-Feinstein and Ward, 1990). It has been observed that the presence of supportive family members, relatives and friends can serve as a buffer from acculturative stress, especially during the initial

periods of acculturation (Cortes, 1995; Miranda and Matheny, 2000). Various studies have shown that among the two types of support (i.e., received support and perceived support), perceived support is an important predictor for psychological well-being (Aranda et al., 2001; Patel, 1992).

Previous studies on social support have utilized a number of measures that includes both open-ended questions and self-report surveys (e.g., Gavazzi, 1994; Lifrak et al., 1997; Norbeck et al., 1981), which are often lengthy and thus may preclude their use in more time-intensive research that also examines multiple constructs. The concept of social support may be viewed differently in different societies, and while it is important to understand how people appraise their social relationships, a lengthy assessment tool is often a barrier to gathering this information. Hence, a short, reliable, and psychometrically acceptable social support assessment tool such as the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) is useful. The 12-item MSPSS developed by Zimet et al. (1988) measures perceived social support from three sources: Family, Friends and Significant Others. The inclusion of significant others is unique to the MSPSS. The MSPSS is simple, easy to understand, and can be administered in a short time and is psychometrically sound. The brevity of the scale also makes it suitable for use in research that requires assessing a number of variables within a limited time.

The MSPSS as a measure of social support has been used among varied populations (e.g., Canty-Mitchell and Zimet, 2000; Kazarian and McCabe, 1991). However, with a few exceptions (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2010; Cheng and Chan, 2004; Chou, 2000; Ng et al., 2010;

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Rizwan and Aftab, 2009), these studies were conducted using western samples. While most of these studies reported good internal reliability and construct validity of the translated MSPSS, only a few were able to replicate the three factor solution of the MSPSS. In the study conducted by Akhtar et al. (2010) among Pakistani women, the Urdu translation of the MSPSS yielded only a single-factor solution, indicating that the participants in the study viewed social support as a single construct. In the study among Chinese adolescents (Chou, 2000), only two factors was identified, that of Family and Friends. The items on the Significant Others and Friends subscales loaded on a single factor, which was combined into a single Friends factor. It is probable that many of the participants may have considered their friends/peers as their significant others (Chou, 2000).

The aim of the current study is to examine the psychometric properties of the MSPSS among South Asians using the Urdu (MSPSS-U) and Nepali (MSPSS-N) translated versions of the MSPSS. This article will specifically focus on examining the factorial structure, reliability, and construct validity of the translated versions of the MSPSS.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

This study involved a cross-sectional survey conducted during the period from July to December 2010. Employing the convenience sampling method, data were collected through survey questionnaires from social service agencies, community centers and religious organizations. Participants were asked to complete a set of questionnaires which included background information, the MSPSS, and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21). It took approximately 20–25 min to administer the questionnaires.

2.2. Participants

The present study was conducted among two sub-groups of South Asian migrants living in Hong Kong, namely, Pakistani and Nepalese. According to the 2006 by-Census data, there were about 55,356 South Asians living in Hong Kong, consisting of people from India, Pakistan, and Nepal. The Indians and Pakistani initially came to Hong Kong as part of Britain's overall expansion of its colonies in the mid 19th century (Vaid, 1972). While many of the present-day Pakistanis in Hong Kong are the descendants of early 19th century migrants, there are also a significant number of recent migrants. According to the 'Place of Birth' information from the 2006 by-Census, nearly 60% of the total Pakistani population in Hong Kong had recently migrated to Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2007, p. 35). The Nepalese, on the other hand, initially came to the Territory in 1948 as part of the Gurkha Brigade of the British Army (FEONA, 2000). The Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 granted right of abode (ROA) to the Gurkhas and to all Nepalese children born in Hong Kong prior to 1983. Since the early 1990s, many Nepalese have exercised this right and migrated to Hong Kong.

The total sample was 301: 153 Nepalese (47.7% males) and 148 Pakistanis (39.2% males). The mean age was 33.2 ($SD = 8.90$) for the Nepalese and 32.4 years ($SD = 8.09$) for the Pakistani sample.

2.3. Procedures

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee for Non-clinical Faculties, the University of Hong Kong, to conduct the study. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and the voluntary nature of their participation. Signed consent forms were obtained from all of those who volunteered to participate. All of the scales used in this study were

translated from the original language to the targeted languages (i.e., Urdu and Nepali) following the translation back-translation method (Brislin, 1970). The translated versions were then back-translated to the source language by two independent bilingual translators. Translators were asked to take effort to ensure that the translated version were culturally adapted to the local language so that they could be easily understood by the participants. To this end, the translators were from the same community as the research participants and so were able to understand the cultural terms and meanings of the words, taking effort to ensure that the translated meanings remained as close as possible to the original meanings. For instance, the item "I felt downhearted and blue" (item # 11, DASS-21) was translated as "I felt depressed and sad" because there was no meaningful translation for the word "blue" in either of the targeted languages. A pilot study was then conducted with six participants (two Pakistani and four Nepalese) in May 2010 using both the Urdu and Nepali versions of the MSPSS. The participants in the pilot study indicated that the translated versions were clear and easily understandable.

2.4. Measures

Two scales were administered to the participants: the MSPSS (Zimet et al., 1988) and the DASS-21 (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995).

The MSPSS is a 12-item instrument which measures perceived support from three sources: Family, Friends and Significant Others (Zimet et al., 1988). Items are scored on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree) with possible scores ranging from 12 to 84. The MSPSS has shown high internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .87, .85, and .91 respectively for the Family, Friends and Significant Others subscales).

The 21-item DASS was administered to assess emotional distress in the past week. The DASS-21 consists of three subscales which are designed to measure the severity and frequency of experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995). It is important to note that the DASS-21 is used as a measure to assess the dimensional nature of emotional distress and to report participants' experiences of related symptoms rather than as a diagnostic tool for categorizing different areas of mental health. Scores on the DASS-21 range from 0 to 63, with higher scores indicating a higher level of emotional distress. The DASS-21 has been used in various research studies, reporting meaningful discriminant validity in a variety of settings (Anthony et al., 1998; Crawford and Henry, 2003; Norton, 1998). The Cronbach's coefficient alphas are: Depression .81; Anxiety .73; and Stress .81 (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The mean and standard deviations of the subscales of the MSPSS and the total scale for the two groups of participants are provided in Table 1. An overview of the mean scores indicated that participants reported relatively high mean scores on support.

3.2. Analyses of age and gender differences

To assess for the potential effects of age and gender, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed for the two subscales of the MSPSS-U and for the three subscales of the MSPSS-N, separately for each group. The MSPSS-U subscales of Family and Friends and the three subscales of the MSPSS-N were entered as the dependent variables and age and gender as the

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