The Effects of Social Support on Psychological Crisis Vulnerability:

Findings from Chinese University Students

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Purposes

When individuals are faced with problems or distresses, if his previous way of dealing with the problems and usual support system are insufficient to cope with the immediate situation, then they will feel temporary psychological imbalance, which is psychological crisis (Caplan, 1964). When college students of youth, their emotions, personality, thinking, and cognition are developing rapidly, they will face psychological crisis from many facets such as study, employment, interpersonal relationships and so on. So they are the high-risk groups of mental health problems and mental diseases. Psychological crisis affects college students’ normal learning and living, how to deal with it properly becomes quite important.

Recently, the Mental Health Education Guidelines of Colleges and Universities Students highlight that “analyze the rapid development of society and economy, the quick approach of the Internet and new media application, personal growth process, family environment, and other factors’ profound influence on students’ mental health”, Therefore, studying psychological crisis vulnerability, analyzing its influence factors would provide a new reference opinion for college students’ psychological crisis education, provide a new thinking path for students’ psychological crisis intervention, so as to prevent adverse consequences of stressful events and promote students’ mental health.

Psychological crisis vulnerability is a kind of psychological trait used to measure an individual’s response to psychological crisis. It refers to the possibility of psychological imbalance and the tendency that the individual’s support is not enough to cope with the current situation when facing an emergency. Current research on vulnerability focuses on internal psychological factors, and there are fewer external environmental considerations. Based on the viewpoint of stress-buffering model, social support from family, friends etc., as an important external environmental factor, represents the degree and quality of individual’s contact with others or groups, and can affect people’s psychological vulnerability.

Theoretical Framework

According to stress-buffering model theory, social resources brought by social support systems can alleviate or prevent the adverse reactions caused by stress events, maintain and improve the level of physical and mental health (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Pressman & Cohen,
Besides, the buffering role of social support needs to be produced through individuals’ internal cognitive system (Hyde, 2011). For instance, it could increase individuals’ self-efficacy to change stress assessment, coping style and self-awareness, thereby reducing stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Hence, it is necessary to introduce the self-efficacy and security into the relationship between social support and vulnerability. Therefore, instead of focusing on influence of people’s internal psychological factors on psychological crisis vulnerability, the current study not only considers individuals’ endogenous factors, i.e. general self-efficacy and security, but also considers the social support as a key exogenous factor, exploring the impact of external social support factors on psychological crisis vulnerability and examine the mediating role of general self-efficacy and security in this process.

**Methods and Data**

Using The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988), Psychological Crisis Vulnerability Scale (Guo et al., 2018), Security Questionnaire (Cong & An, 2004) and The General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), 414 college students in Shanghai Universities were investigated on Tencent Questionnaire (an online platform). All the participants were recruited by researchers using social networks and snowball sampling techniques.

R 3.6.1 was used for descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analyses. The PROCESS macro for SPSS 22.0 (Hayes, 2013) was used to fit the proposed mediating model, all completely standardized indirect effects were subjected to follow-up Bootstrap analyses with 5000 bootstrap resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs, an indirect path is significant when 0 is not included in the 95% CIs).

**Results**

The results showed that: (1) Social support was significantly positively correlated with both general self-efficacy and security ($p < 0.001$), and significantly negatively correlated with psychological crisis vulnerability ($p < 0.001$); security was significantly positively correlated with general self-efficacy ($p < 0.001$), and both of them were significantly negatively correlated with psychological crisis vulnerability ($p < 0.001$); (2) family support had no significant influence on psychological crisis vulnerability ($\beta = -0.01, p = 0.82$), while the support of significant others ($\beta = -0.21, p < 0.01$) and friends ($\beta = -0.31, p < 0.001$) were significantly negative for psychological crisis vulnerability; (3) security and general self-efficacy had significant mediating effect between social support and psychological crisis vulnerability ($\beta = -0.29$, Bootstrap 95% CI $[-0.21, -0.06]$).

The study combined the external social support factors with internal security and self-efficacy, revealing the relationship between social support and psychological crisis vulnerability and their internal influence mechanism. It further verified the stress-buffer model about the role of social support in the process of mental health, enriched the study of individual psychological crisis characteristics, and provided references for improving college students’ ability to cope with psychological crisis.

Results of the study would help us grasp the students’ mental health status and the change rule accurately, and improve the coverage and scientific nature of mental health quality assessment constantly. Specifically, schools and society should cooperate with each other to establish psychological crisis prevention and counseling system, make up for the weakening of the family
support function. School support should gradually become an important way for college students to overcome psychological crisis and provide them with resources to overcome psychological crisis. In addition to teachers giving emotional support and information for students to create a safe learning environment, school departments should actively carry out psychological counseling to help students overcome psychological problems, improve the general self-efficacy, and have students grow up in a healthy and positive environment.