Just here for moral support: A path analysis of depression and social support networks

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Introduction

Social support has been shown to be associated with lower depression scores in a variety of populations. Using a series of questionnaires, Leary, Warren, McCarthy, and Corcoran (2011) found significant negative relationships between functional social support and postnatal depression as well as between informal social support and postnatal depression. Grav et al. (2011) conducted a similar study on the general population, and found that perceived social support was significantly correlated to depression.

Research suggests that there are gender differences in the relationship between social support and depression. Utilizing data from the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam, Sonnenberg et al. (2013) found a lack of partner in the household and a small network predicted depression in males but not in females. There is evidence that certain types of social support changes throughout adulthood. A meta analysis conducted by Wyrus et al. (2013) revealed that friendship networks decreases throughout adulthood, but that family networks remained consistent.

Anxiety has been shown to be negatively correlated to certain types of social support. Using data from the Collaborative Psychiatric Epidemiology Surveys, Priest, (2012) found that, for both single and married participants, relative and friend relationship quality was associated with several different anxiety disorders. The current study aims to empirically understand depression, anxiety and social support using a path analysis. A full and trimmed path model able to predict Depression was constructed using Gender, Age, Marital Status, Trait Anxiety, Friend Social Support, Significant Other Social Support, Family Social Support, State Anxiety, Loneliness, and Stress as predictors.

Methods

Participants included college aged and adult individuals recruited from two large Midwestern Universities and three large Midwestern Community Colleges via flyers posted outside of Introductory Psychology classrooms. 650 persons interested in the study were mailed a set of self-report questionnaires, including the Beck Depression Inventory to assess depression. 363 of these individuals (169 male) responded and were used in the analysis. A full path model for Depression was created using Gender, Age, Marital Status, Trait Anxiety, Friend Social Support, Significant Other Social Support, Family Social Support, State Anxiety, Loneliness, and Stress as predictors. Regression analyses were performed for each possible criterion and predictor combination amongst the aforementioned variables. Then all non-significant paths were removed from the full model to create a trimmed model version.

Results

Table 1: Full Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Trait Anxiety</th>
<th>Seniors' Social Support</th>
<th>State Anxiety</th>
<th>Stress</th>
<th>Depression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>β</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.427</td>
<td>0.224</td>
<td>0.252</td>
<td>error associated with R² = 0.166</td>
<td>error associated with R² = 0.528</td>
<td>error associated with R² = 0.230</td>
<td>error associated with R² = 0.545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>error associated with Depression = 0.687</td>
<td>error associated with Loneliness = 0.675</td>
<td>error associated with Stress = 0.877</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Trimmed Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Trait Anxiety</th>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Twenty nonsignificant paths were dropped from the full model to create the trimmed model. However, all the predictor variables in the full model were either a direct or indirect statistically significant predictor of Depression, so none of the predictor variables were eliminated in the trimmed model. The trimmed model did not have a significantly different fit from the full model.

In future studies, it would be interesting to look at the fit of the model for different populations. Such as, seeing if the model works equally well for those in different socio-economic classes, or different ethnic backgrounds, or different sexual orientations. It would also be interesting to create a similar study in a more structured lab environment. For example, exposing participants to unpleasant video stimuli, then controlling the social support they receive afterwards by having them interact with a confederate. A study such as this with more internal validity paired with the current study, which has more external validity, would help provide a better overall understanding of the relationships involved.

References


