



Family acceptance and life satisfaction among undergraduates: Moderating role of significant others social support

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ABSTRACT

The ecological social theory and the relational regulation theory assumed that the interaction between the different resources in the micro system (family acceptance and significant others social support) may explain how life satisfaction is sustained among the individuals. In the current study, this assumption is tested among 120 undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. Ages of the participants were 20 to 27 years ($M = 22.4$ years, $SD = 2.07$). Three scales were used to collect data for the study: Perceived Acceptance Scale- Family (PAS-F); Significant Others Social Support Scale (SOSSS); and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SwLS). The study adapted a predictive correlation design and the hypotheses were tested with moderated regression analysis. The result showed that both family acceptance and significant others social support predicted life satisfaction. The interaction term of family acceptance and significant others social support significantly predicted life satisfaction. It was suggested that enhanced programs that promote synergy between family and other institutions can promote life satisfaction.

Introduction

For over four decades, research interests in psychological topics have shifted slightly from the abnormal-based paradigm to positive psychology (Schnettler et al., 2014; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This positive psychological paradigm is focused on understanding human behaviour from the individuals' subjective experiences of their positive qualities and well-being (Diener, 1984). In this view, life satisfaction is an important cognitive component of subjective well-being which also has a humanistic principle. This is because the individual is the center of interest and can perceive the life circumstances with some self-imposed standard, and to the degree that the conditions match these standards; the individual is more likely to report high life satisfaction (Schnettler et al., 2017). Thus, life satisfaction is conceived as a judgmental process through which individuals assess the quality of their lives based on their own unique set of criteria (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Life satisfaction has been also identified as the major component of the cognitive domain of subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Margolis, Schwitzgebel, Ozer & Lyubomirsky, 2018). The construct of life satisfaction as adapted in the present study is operationalized as an individual's global judgment of his or her life rather than satisfaction with a specific domain of life (see: Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Margolis et al., 2018).

Researchers have reiterated the importance of exploring how life satisfaction is developed and sustained across life span (Baird, Lucas & Donnellan, 2010; Gerstorf et al., 2008) and more importantly among university students (Schnettler, et al. 2014; Schnettler, et al., 2017). Specifically, among university students the report of optimal life satisfaction had been shown to be related to some desirable outcomes such as graduation with good grades, self-esteem, positive interpersonal

relationships, low psychological distress, happiness and general success (Antaraminn, 2017; Erdogan, Bauer, Truxilo & Mansfield, 2012; Pavot & Diener, 2008; Rode et al., 2005). Life satisfaction is also one of the positive psychological constructs that is necessary for the definition of the structure of an individual mental health which is characterized by the strengths and positive qualities that allows the individuals to flourish and thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Given these highlights about the usefulness of life satisfaction in understanding the individuals' behaviour and well-being, it becomes expedient to examine how different factors (e.g., family acceptance and significant others support) may relate and interact to predict life satisfaction among undergraduate students.

Two theories - social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) and relational regulation theory (Lakey & Orehek, 2011) formed the theoretical framework that guided this study's hypotheses. Bronfenbrenner (1999) postulated that the quality of experience, judgment and behaviour an individual can exhibit at any point in time may be as a result of accumulation of nurturing he/she received from one or combination two or more levels of the ecological system. At the foundation or first level of this ecological system is the micro-system (e.g. family, neighborhood, school), and the quality of interaction between the different players in the micro-system now called "macro-system" (e.g., interaction between family acceptance and significant others social support). Similarly, the relational regulation theory (Lakey & Orehek, 2011) assumed that in each of the ecological systems different forms of resources (e.g., perceived acceptance, social support) can have direct impact on the mental health (life satisfaction) of the individual. This is because as the individual relate with the social ecological resources, emotions and attachments are

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regulated through ordinary and natural conversation and other shared activities. Through these theoretical assumptions we formulated some hypothetical statements to guide the present study.

First, we assumed that the individual's report of their levels of family acceptance will predict his/her level of life satisfaction. According to Brock, Sarason, Sanghvi and Gurung (1998), family acceptance can be described in terms of relationship –specific: whereby there are relatively stable cognitive appraisals that one's family members care for and value one unconditionally. Thus, acceptance is not contingent upon our holding attitudes or acting differently from how we typically act. Brock et al. (1998) further distinguished family acceptance from family support in that the former focuses only on the cognitive domain of support. Ideally, family acceptance stemmed from a foundation of positive and supportive experiences with members of the family. However, since social support measures are not simply tapping into acceptance exclusively, but some more complex appraisal system, then the contribution of acceptance needs to be determined and understood in relation to other constructs (e.g., life satisfaction).

Although there are sparse empirical studies on the relationship between family acceptance and life satisfaction, some studies have shown that family support and by extension family acceptance can have important roles to play on the life satisfaction of an individual. In a study with 72 undergraduate students, Goodwin and Hernandez (2000) found that support from family members have significant and positive correlation with life satisfaction. Similarly, Leung, McBride and Lai (2004), found in a longitudinal study among Hong Kong students, that perceived maternal concern predicted life satisfaction. Also, Edwards and Lopez (2006) found among high-school Mexican-Americans that family support has a significant relationship with life satisfaction. In the same vein, other researchers have demonstrated that various indicators of low life satisfactions have negative correlations with family support (Brannan, Biswas-Diener, Mohr, Mortazavi, & Stein, 2013; Chang et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018).

Second, we also assumed that the levels of social support an individual received from the significant others (lecturer, supervisors, mentors and sponsors) can predict one's level of life satisfaction. The significant others social support is an important component of the social support system (Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) which is related to verbal and nonverbal communication or interaction between recipients and providers (teachers, mentors, supervisors) that reduces uncertainty about situation, self or relationship and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience. In other words, significant others social support can be operationalized to imply an individual's perception and actuality that he/she is cared for, has assistance available from other people apart from family and friends and most importantly that he/she is part of a supportive social network. The supportive resources can be in form of emotional, tangible, informational or companionship and intangible (Chang et al., 2017; Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

Some empirical studies have supported the relationship between significant other social support and life satisfaction. Toplu-Demirtas, Kemer, Pope and Moe (2018) found among their samples that support from significant others have significant correlation with subjective well-being. In a similar study, Budge, Rossman and Howard (2014) found that significant others support has robust link to well-being. Among Jordanian university students, Alorani and Alradaydeh (2018) found that this component of social support correlated significantly with life satisfaction. Other researchers have also shown that social

support have robust links to life satisfaction (e.g., Bai, Yang, & Knapp, 2018; Kong, Ding & Zhao, 2014; Kong & You, 2013).

Third, we further assumed that the relationship between family acceptance and life satisfaction will be moderated by perceived significant others support. One of the premises of social ecological theory is that the nature of interaction between the different resources in the micro system - macro system can enhance or jeopardize the qualities of behaviour. For instance, the nature and quality of interaction between two micro system resources (family acceptance and significant others) is presumed to create another important level or system - the macro system. In the present study, we tested whether the activities that translate into macro system (interaction between family acceptance and significant others) will predict life satisfaction. Because family acceptance and significant others support are usually treated as members of the same constellation, researchers sparsely consider their relationship. However, some validity studies found significant correlation between the indicators of family acceptance and various forms of social support (Banovcinova & Baskova, 2016; Brock, et al., 1998; Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000).

Method

One hundred and twenty (120) undergraduate students of the Department of Psychology from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, who gave their informed consent participated in this study. They comprised second- and third-year students. Their ages ranged from 20 to 27 years ($M = 22.4$ years, $SD = 2.07$). Sixty-four (53%) of the participants were male, while fifty-six (46%) were female.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data for the study., namely, Perceived Acceptance Scale- Family (PAS-F), Significant Others subscale of Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

Perceived Acceptance Scale- Family (PAS-F)

This is a subscale of perceived acceptance scale (Brock et al., 1998) which has 12 items with a 5-point Likert respond format ranging from strongly disagree =1 to strongly agree =5. Six of the items were reversed during scoring. The items include; “my parents objected to a number of things I did” ; “I often feel left out of things in my relationship with my family”. Brock, et al., (1998) report a Cronbach alpha of .93 for the scale, while the Cronbach alpha for the present study is .72.

Significant Others subscale of Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

A subscale of multidimensional scale of perceived social support (Zimet, et al., 1988) was used to collect data. The scale has 4 items with a 7-point Likert respond format ranging from very strongly disagree =1 to very strongly agree = 7. Zimet et al. (1988) report a Cronbach alpha of .94. However, the Cronbach alpha for the present study is .84

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SwLS)

Diener et al. (1985) developed and validated this scale to measure the general domain of life satisfaction. It contains 5 items with a 7-point Likert respond format ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 7. The authors reported a Cronbach's alpha of .92, however the Cronbach alpha for the present study is .83.

Procedure

All the participants who volunteered to participate in the study completed a consent form. Thereafter the scales were administered to them on their lecture free day in their lecture halls. A total of 60 year 3 and 60 year 2 students consented to participate. All the questionnaire forms were collected from the participants on completion. It took about 8 minutes to complete the questionnaire for this study. The completed scales were scored and used for the analysis.

Design/Statistics

The study applied the predictive - correlation design. Descriptive statistics was first conducted to determine whether the raw data was normally distributed (skewness and kurtosis). Pearson's *r* product moment correlation was conducted to establish whether the variable correlated significantly. Moderated regression and conditional process analysis model 1 (Hayes, 2013) was used to test the hypotheses. All the statistical analyses were conducted with SPSS version 23

Results

Table 1 showed that the raw data collected for the study is normally distributed and adequate for further parametric analysis. The skewness and kurtosis fall within acceptable range of -2 to +2 (see: Garson, 2012).

The result of the Pearson *r* correlation coefficients showed that family acceptance and significant others support significantly correlated with life satisfaction ($r = .37$) and ($.71$, $p < .01$), respectively. Also, family acceptance was significantly correlated with significant others support ($r = .44$), $p < .01$.

Table 1: Mean, Standard Deviation (*SD*), Skewness and Kurtosis of the scores study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Std error	Kurtosis	Std error
Life satisfaction	19.90	6.08	-.41	.22	1.30	.43
Family acceptance	37.45	8.87	-.68	.22	.64	.43
Significant others support	20.66	4.51	-1.10	.22	.98	.43

Table 2 Pearson *r* product moment coefficients between family acceptance, significant others social support and life satisfaction

S/N	Variables	1	2	3
1	Life satisfaction	1		
2	Family acceptance	.37**	1	
3	Significant others support	.71**	.44**	1

** $p < .01$

Table 3 Moderated regression for the interaction between family acceptance and significant others social support on life satisfaction

Latent	$R^2(\Delta)$	$Df1(df2)$	$F(\Delta)$	B	t	Std Error	LLCI	ULCI
Model summary	.56(.06)	3(116)	51.99**(16.39**)					
Family acceptance (A)				.61**	4.12**	.15	.32	.91
Significant others support (B)				1.93**	7.30**	.27	1.41	2.46
A*B				-.03*	-4.07**	.07	-.05	-.02

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ Δ = increase on adjust R^2 and F -ratio as a result of the interaction

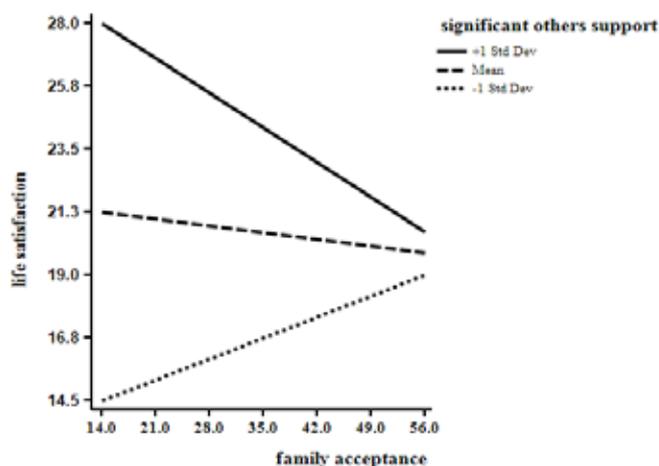


Figure 1: The graph for the interaction between family acceptance and significant others social support on life satisfaction

The result of the moderated regression (see: Table 3) showed that the entire model contributed to 56% of the understanding of life satisfaction $F(3,116) = 51.99$, $p < .01$. Specifically, the unstandardized beta coefficients for family acceptance, significant others support and A*B significantly predicted life satisfaction, $B = .61$, 1.93 and $-.03$, $p < .05$ respectively.

The interaction graph for the continuous moderator (significant other support) showed that the effect of family acceptance on life satisfaction changes significantly when the simple slope for $+1SD$ $-.18$, $p < .01$ and $-1SD$ $.11$, $p < .05$, but not for the mean(0) = $-.03$, $p > .05$.

Discussion

The present study examined whether family acceptance, significant others social support and the interaction between the two factors will significantly predict life satisfaction among undergraduate students of a Nigerian university. Results confirmed that family acceptance significantly and positively predicted life satisfaction among this samples. Thus, the finding is in accord with the existing findings in empirical literature that family acceptance and other related constructs significantly predicted life satisfaction of individuals (Brannan et al., 2013; Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Chang et al., 2017; Goodwin & Hernandez, 2000; Kim et al., 2018; Leung et al., 2004). Social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) and relational regulation theory (Lakey & Orehek, 2011) also offered some explanations on why the resources and social mechanisms within the micro system (immediate family) should be expected to naturally influence the well-being of individual through relational regulations of agents of the family. In other words, if the resources within the families such as caring, trust, love, nurturing and provision of other basic physiological needs were adequate, these probably will initiate some sense of positive well-being in an individual which may ardently guide the individual in setting standard or criteria for life satisfaction.

Second, the result also confirmed that significant others social support was a significant predictor of life satisfaction. Similar, results have been reported in previous studies that tested related constructs. Researchers (e.g., Alorani & Alradaydeh, 2018; Bai et al., 2018; Kong et al., 2014; Kong & You, 2013; Budge, Rossman, & Howard; 2014; Toplu-Demirtas, et al., 2018) found that significant others support and social support were related to life satisfaction. Part of the micro system of an individual is the neighborhood, church, school and significant others who are found in these environments. Given their presumed roles in acculturation, socialization, academic, and spiritual lives of an individual, relational regulation theory support that the perceived contributions of these socio-cultural milieu to the individual predicts life satisfaction of such individual.

Third, we found that the ability of family acceptance to predict life satisfaction increases along the varying values of the moderating factor (significant others social support. This outcome was expected since family acceptance and significant others social support are components of overall social support (Brock et al., 1998; Zimet et al., 1988). Similarly, correlations between the two factors in the previous studies have yielded positive coefficients (Banovcinova & Baskova, 2016; Brock et al., 1998; Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000). The social ecological theory presumed that at the macro system level, positive interactions would influence the quality of well-being and by extension life satisfaction.

Implications of the findings

The present study has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it expanded the utility of social ecological theory which is thought to be a purely behavioral perspective in explaining the humanistic construct of life satisfaction. Similarly, it shows that relational regulation, a natural phenomenon found in every ecological context may be an important synergy through which ecological resources (activities of families, neighborhood, and school may impact on the quality and standard an individual could set as criteria for life satisfaction.

The practical implication is drawn from the fact that lack of satisfaction with life, if not properly managed could lead to devastating and preventable psychological outcomes. Although, most undergraduates are adults, our finding shows that they still need the family warmth and acceptance as well

as significant others support to function well. Thus, informal and formal mentorship programs that can encourage more relationship between students and significant others in the universities should be resuscitated or new programs established. It also implied that families and school environment should endeavour to create an atmosphere that will gradually and consistently make the individual to trust the systems. This will help the individuals to set positive standards that will enhance their well-being.

Limitation and suggestion for further studies

The present study utilizes cross-sectional technique in data collection and as such lack temporality of measurement. Thus, causality cannot be inferred from the finding and caution must be exercised in interpreting the result as relational outcomes. Further studies could however explore the constructs using longitudinal design. Only self-report measures were used in data collection. Further studies could consider triangulation methods which will allow both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected.

Conclusion

The present study explored whether significant others social support will moderate the relationship between family acceptance and life satisfaction among undergraduates. Evidence from the findings showed that overall, the role of family acceptance in determining the level of life satisfaction an individual experience differed along significant others social support. This further confirmed the presumptions of ecological theory and relational regulation theory that the natural activities in the micro system that transformed into macro system were indeed important in determining the level of life satisfaction an individual may experience.

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