Social support and life satisfaction among Hong Kong Chinese older adults: family first?

Gladys T. Y. Yeung · Helene H. Fung

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Abstract Family members and friends are important for the psychological well being of older adults. The present study examined the relative contribution of these two sources of support to life satisfaction among Chinese older adults living in Hong Kong. The moderating role of familism, which represents the commitment of family members to the family, was also examined. One hundred and eight Chinese older adults participated in the study. Findings suggest that, in general, family support contributes more to the life satisfaction of older adults than does friend support. While emotional support from family members is beneficial to life satisfaction of older adults regardless of individual differences in familism, instrumental support contributes more to life satisfaction for older adults with higher familism.

Keywords Social support · Instrumental support · Emotional support · Life satisfaction · Older adults · Familism

Introduction

Social support enhances adjustment by increasing positive affect, self-confidence, self-mastery and/or sense of personal satisfaction (e.g., Heller et al. 1986). Companionship, social activity and social support are essential for maintaining well being in old age. A higher level of received social support is related to a higher level of life satisfaction

(Aquino et al. 1996), happiness (Siu and Phillips 2002) and a lower level of loneliness (Rook 2001; Wang et al. 2004).

In particular, there has been an abundance of literature on the positive impacts of social support from family and friends on psychological well being of older adults. Family support plays an important role in maintaining life satisfaction, happiness and competency of older adults (Blazer et al. 1992). It also contributes to positive self-evaluation (Krause and Liang 1993) and absence of loneliness (Thompson and Heller 1990). Similarly, support from friends is related to higher happiness, higher life satisfaction (Spakes 1979), enhanced self-worth (Chown 1981) and lower loneliness (Mullins and Mushel 1992) among older adults.

Although the benefits of social support to older adults are indisputable, there has been controversy over the relative contribution of social support from family and friends (e.g., Lee and Shehan 1989; Thompson and Heller 1990). To address this controversy, in this study, we compared the relative impacts of emotional and instrumental support from family members and friends on the life satisfaction of Chinese older adults living in Hong Kong. In addition, we examined whether these relationships were moderated by individual differences in familism—defined as the degree to which one identifies with the family.

Relative contribution of family support and friend support to psychological well being

On the one hand, some studies found that support from family members was more important than support from friends in predicting psychological well being of older adults (Thompson and Heller 1990). This may be the case because family members tend to be closer to the individual,

G. T. Y. Yeung · H. H. Fung (✉)
Department of Psychology, Chinese University of Hong Kong,
Room 328 Sino Building, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong
e-mail: hhlfung@psy.cuhk.edu.hk

both physically and psychologically, than do most other people including friends (Antonucci 1994). Other studies, on the other hand, found that friendship was more important than family relationships in predicting psychological well being of older adults (Lee and Shehan 1989; O'Connor 1995). As older adults share similar socio-economic background and physical conditions with their friends, they are more likely to share private matters with friends than with family members (Novak 1997). Moreover, the voluntary nature of friendship may make receiving support from friends less detrimental to the autonomy of the individual than receiving support from family members (Lee and Shehan 1989; Siu and Phillips 2002).

In addition, whether the support is instrumental or emotional may also matter. Siu and Phillips (2002) suggested that friends are more specialized in emotional support than family members do. The paternalistic and hierarchical kinship structure of families may hinder the sharing of emotions between parents and children (Freeman and Ruan 1997). The reverse may be the case for instrumental support, as there is a stronger sense of entitlement in receiving instrumental support from family members than from friends. In other words, while friend support may be more important than family support to the psychological well being of older adults when the support is emotional, the reverse may be true when the support is instrumental.

The moderating role of familism

Although no empirical evidence has yet been available, there have been some suggestions that these differential effects of instrumental and emotional support from family and friends may be moderated by individual differences in emphasis on family ties and collectivism (Lee et al. 2005). Collectivism encompasses an orientation to the in-group and away from the out-group (Oyserman 1993), as well as the obligation of an individual to the group (Oyserman et al. 2002). It influences how people achieve well being, make judgment and relate to others (Oyserman 1993). Familism is a specific type of collectivism. It represents the commitment of each family member to the family. It refers to the wish to extend the family, to fulfil family goals, to have strong in-group feelings, and to provide and receive support from family members (Bardis 1959). For people with high levels of familism, the family rather than the individual is given priority (Wei 1974; Yang 1988). More specifically, Chan and Lee (1995) coined the term “collective-egocentrism” to describe familism: Interests and gains are conceived at the level of the familial group to which one belongs to rather than at the individual level.

To the extent that familism means regarding the family and the self as one and the same entity, older adults with a higher level of familism may have less problems in sharing emotions with their family members than those with a lower level of familism. They are also more likely to have a sense of entitlement in receiving instrumental support from family members, who are, after all, just parts of the self. These social cognitions may enable them to benefit more from family support than friend support, regardless of whether the support is emotional or instrumental.

Although the moderating role of familism has not yet been directly examined, research conducted in cultures that are more collectivistic have generally found a greater effect of family support than friend support on older adults' psychological well being. Compared with the American and Western European cultures where the aforementioned studies on family and friend support in old age were conducted, the Chinese culture is more collectivistic (Oyserman et al. 2002). Social life in the culture is predominantly family oriented, placing a great deal of emphasis on close kin relations and familial interests (Lau 1981). Studies conducted in this culture found that informal support of older adults was provided mainly by their families (Chow 2000). Lam and Boey (2005) also found that Chinese older adults who sought support from family were less lonely than those who sought support from friends. Family support was found to exert a stronger effect on depressive symptoms than did friend support (Chou and Chi 2001, 2003).

Yet, collectivism at the culture level does not seem to completely eliminate the differential effects of emotional and instrumental support. Despite the fact that the importance of family members in providing instrumental support to Chinese older adults has been shown across several studies (Siu and Phillips 2002; Lee et al. 2005), findings were more mixed when emotional support was examined. Lee et al. (2005) found that family and friends were equally important in providing emotional support to older adults. Siu and Phillips (2002), in contrast, found that friends were more important in providing emotional support than did family members. It is theoretically significant to examine whether these differential effects of instrumental and emotional support may be moderated by individual differences in familism within the same culture.

In the present study, we attempted to address these research questions by comparing the relative contribution of instrumental and emotional support from family members and friends to life satisfaction among Chinese older adults living in Hong Kong. We also directly measured familism and tested its role in moderating the relationships between sources of support (family vs. friend), types of support (instrumental vs. emotional) and life satisfaction.

In particular, we hypothesize that older adults with a lower level of familism would benefit less, in terms of life satisfaction, from family support relative to friend support. Since they are less likely to consider family members to be parts of their self, family support, particularly instrumental support, may be more detrimental to their autonomy and thus may be associated with lower life satisfaction. In contrast, older adults with a higher level of familism would benefit more, in terms of life satisfaction, from support from family members, relative to support from friends. This would be the case regardless of whether the support is instrumental or emotional.

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample included 108 Chinese older adults (93 female and 15 male) aged 61–93 years ($M = 75.09$, $SD = 6.46$), residing in the community in Hong Kong, China. Participants were recruited through social service centers. Data were collected by face-to-face interviews, conducted in Cantonese Chinese. Each interview lasted 45–60 min.

Measures

The scales were originally in English. They were translated into Chinese using the standard method of back-translation. We standardized the measurement of all scales to a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), as participants found it difficult to switch between different kinds of scaling.

Instrumental and emotional support from family and friends

Participants were asked to indicate three family members and three friends who were “so close to you that you could not imagine life without.” We adopted this instruction from that of the inner circle of the Social Convoy Questionnaire (Kahn and Antonucci 1980). Then, following the procedure of Lang and Schutze (2002), participants rated the support they received from each of the indicated family members and friends in terms of the extent to which they agreed that the social partner (a) was willing to help; (b) gave support in time of difficulty; (c) gave useful suggestions; (d) showed appreciation to the participant; (e) cheered the participant up when he/she was sad or worried; (f) confided in the participant. The first three items (i.e., items a–c) measured instrumental support and the remaining items

(i.e., items d–f) measured emotional support. We modified the original measurement of yes/no to a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Mean instrumental and emotional support from family and friends were computed by taking the mean of the ratings for the relevant items across the three family members and three friends, respectively.

Familism

The familism scale (Bardis 1959) was used to obtain a measure of the extent to which one remained closely associated with one’s family group rather than seeking independence. The familism scale originally includes 13 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). In the present study, we modified the anchors so that participants indicated their degree of agreement, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), on items like “our family has always been a close-knit family.” Due to concerns regarding the length of the interview, 10 out of 13 items of the original scale were used. A composite score of familism was computed by taking the mean of the ratings for the 10 items.

Life satisfaction

Life Satisfaction was measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al. 1985). The scale has been successfully used among Hong Kong older adults in a prior study (Leung et al. 2005). SWLS originally includes 5 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In the present study, a 5-point scale was used instead because our participants had problems in understanding the conceptual meaning of a 7-point scale. We employed a 4-item version of the scale with the last item, “if I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing,” discarded because it was difficult for our participants to imagine such a hypothetical situation. The mean score of the 4 items was computed to form a composite score of life satisfaction.

Extraversion

Extraversion was included in the present study as a potential covariate because extraversion was found to be related to social relationships (e.g., Kitamura et al. 2002; Swickert et al. 2002) and life satisfaction (e.g., Herringer 1998; Zhang 2005) in the literature. The extraversion scale of the Big Five Inventory (BFI) (John et al. 1991) was used. This

scale has been successfully used by Zhang (2002) among Hong Kong Chinese. Participants rated themselves on six adjectives, such as being talkative, on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A composite score of extraversion was computed by taking the mean of the ratings for the six items.

Health

A single-item measure of perceived health was included as another potential covariate. Participants rated their health as very good, good, average, poor or very poor with reference to other people of their age.

In addition, participants reported their age, gender, marital status, and number of children, income, and educational level. See the section on preliminary analyses below for descriptive statistics on these demographic variables.

Statistical methods

Statistical analyses were conducted in order to explore the association between social support and life satisfaction. A multiple regression analysis was first performed to investigate the relative contribution of family instrumental support, family emotional support, friend instrumental support and friend emotional support on life satisfaction. Four sets of hierarchical regression analyses were then performed to investigate the moderating role of familism in the relationship between the four (two sources: family vs. friend by two types: instrumental vs. emotional) kinds of social support and life satisfaction. In other words, in the first set of regression analyses, life satisfaction was regressed on family instrumental support, familism and their interaction. Similarly, life satisfaction was regressed on family emotional support, familism and their interaction in the second set of regression analyses. In the third and fourth sets of regression analyses, life satisfaction was regressed on friend instrumental support, familism and their interaction, and friend emotional support, familism and their interaction, respectively.

Results

Psychometrical properties of measures

In the present study, the Cronbach's alphas for instrumental and emotional support from family members were 0.90 and 0.88, respectively. The Cronbach's alphas for instrumental and emotional support from friends were 0.96 and 0.96, respectively. For the familism scale, the satisfaction with

life scale and the extraversion measure, the Cronbach's alphas are 0.81, 0.82 and 0.68, respectively.

Preliminary analysis

Income was measured by categories, with 74% of participants with income below HK\$5000, 17% with income between HK\$5,001 and HK\$10,000, 7% with income HK\$10,001–HK\$20,000, 2% with income HK\$20,001–HK\$30,000. Concerning education level, 50% of participants did not receive any formal education, 41% had received only primary education, and 9% received secondary or higher education. The marital status of 42% of the participants were widowed, 43% were currently married, 8% were single (never married) and 7% were divorced. Participants had a mean of 3.51 children ($SD = 2.30$), ranging from zero to eight children. When asked to evaluate their health in relation to other people of their age, 15% of participants considered their health to be very good, 31% considered their health to be good, 38% to be average, 9% to be poor and the other 7% to be very poor.

When asked to indicate family members who were so close to them that they could not imagine life without, 70% of participants indicated at least one child; 23% indicated their spouse. Other family members chosen included sons-in-law/daughters-in-law (11%), sibling (7%) and grandchildren (6%). When analyzed separately, the effects of spouse and children support on life satisfaction did not differ significantly. Therefore, we did not distinguish between family support from children and family support from spouse in the following analyses.

On average, participants received a moderate-to-high level of instrumental family support ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.93$), emotional family support ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.00$), instrumental friend support ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.07$) and emotional friend support ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.98$). They also reported moderate levels of familism ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.78$) and life satisfaction ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.85$).

Relative contribution of different sources and types of social support to life satisfaction

A correlation matrix for all variables included in the study is presented in Table 1. Statistically controlling for demographic variables, health and extraversion, or normalizing life satisfaction, did not alter the results we report below.

Among all kinds of support, only family instrumental support ($r = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$) and family emotional support ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) significantly correlated with life satisfaction. Friend instrumental support ($r = 0.18$, ns) and friend emotional support ($r = 0.20$, ns) did not. This

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients between demographic variables, extraversion, familism, support and life satisfaction

M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Being female	86%	–	0.07	–0.25*	0.07	–0.26**	0.17	–0.11	–0.17	–0.11	–0.11	0.00	0.00	0.12
2. Age	75.1 (6.5)	–	–	–0.35***	–0.16	–0.22**	–0.19	–0.04	–0.21*	–0.15	–0.15	–0.06	–0.01	–0.10
3. Being married	Currently married 43%		–	0.22*	0.20*	0.08	0.05	–0.02	0.19	0.18	0.15	0.06	–0.08	–0.05
	Not currently married 57%													
4. Number of children	3.5 (2.3)			–	0.02	0.32**	0.08	0.08	0.12	0.21*	0.12	0.29**	0.05	0.03
5. Education level	No edu. 50%				–	0.16	0.26**	0.12	0.07	0.09	0.04	–0.00	–0.15	–0.07
	Primary edu. 41%													
	Secondary edu. or above 9%													
6. Income	<\$5,000 74%					–	–0.01	0.09	0.12	0.13	0.14	0.23*	0.08	0.08
	\$5,001–10,000 17%													
	\$10,001–20,000 7%													
	\$20,001–30,000 2%													
7. Health	Very good 15%						–	0.41***	0.07	0.30**	0.19	0.30**	0.13	0.26*
	Good 31%													
	Average 38%													
	Poor 9%													
	Very poor 7%													
8. Extraversion	3.4 (0.7)							–	0.19	0.37***	0.13	0.19	0.21	0.23*
9. Familism	3.6 (0.8)								–	0.48***	0.35***	0.45***	0.30***	0.18
10. Life satisfaction	3.9 (0.9)									–	0.31**	0.42***	0.18	0.20
11. Instrumental support from family	4.0 (0.9)										–	0.63***	0.36***	0.29**
12. Emotional support from family	3.6 (1.0)											–	0.36***	0.34***
13. Instrumental support from friends	3.8 (1.1)												–	0.75***
14. Emotional support from friends	4.0 (1.0)													–

Note. Extraversion, familism, life satisfaction, instrumental support from family, emotion support from family, instrumental support from friends and emotional support from friends were measured on a 5-point (1–5) scale

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

suggested that family support was more important to our sample of Chinese older adults than was friend support. Moreover, familism also significantly correlated with life satisfaction ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$).

A regression analysis was performed to determine the relative contribution of family instrumental support, family emotional support, friend instrumental support and friend emotional support to life satisfaction. Results revealed that only family emotional support significantly predicted life satisfaction, $\beta = 0.34$ $p < 0.05$; but family instrumental support, $\beta = 0.17$ ns, friend instrumental support, $\beta = -0.06$ ns, and friend emotional support, $\beta = -0.08$, ns, did not. The four predictors accounted for 23% variance in life satisfaction. These findings suggest that family support, particularly family emotional support, plays a more important role in influencing life satisfaction than does friend support.

Moderating roles of familism in the associations between social support and life satisfaction

Four hierarchical multiple regressions were performed to examine the effects of family/friend support, familism, and

their interactions on life satisfaction. Results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

As the table shows, a significant family instrumental support by familism interaction on life satisfaction was found. Further analyses were performed to investigate the pattern of interaction (Aiken and West 1991), using an Excel-based programme, named ModGraph, developed by Jose (2003). Post-hoc probing of the simple slopes indicated that family instrumental support was positively related to life satisfaction for participants with higher (at mean + 1 SD) familism ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$) and medium (at mean) familism ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.05$). In contrast, for participants with lower familism (at mean -1 SD), family instrumental support and life satisfaction were not significantly related ($\beta = 0.04$, ns) (see Fig. 1).

The interaction between family emotional support and familism on life satisfaction was not significant. The main effect of family emotional support was significant in predicting life satisfaction, $\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$. Concerning instrumental and emotional support from friends, the friend instrumental support by familism interaction, $\beta = -0.03$, ns, and the friend emotional support by familism interaction, $\beta = -0.11$, ns, were both nonsignificant. Nor was the

Table 2 Summary of Regression results on predicting life satisfaction by family/friend support, familism and their interactions

	B	SE	Beta	R^2	R^2 Change	F Change
<i>Family instrumental support</i>						
Step 1						
Family instrumental support	0.20	0.08	0.24*	0.22	0.22	12.46**
Familism	0.31	0.08	0.38***			
Step 2						
Family instrumental support $\times$ Familism	0.17	0.07	0.22*	0.27	0.05	5.66*
<i>Family emotional support</i>						
Step 1						
Family emotional support	0.22	0.08	0.28**	0.25	0.25	15.27***
Familism	0.28	0.09	0.34**			
Step 2						
Family emotional support $\times$ Familism	0.10	0.08	0.13	0.27	0.02	1.90
<i>Friend instrumental support</i>						
Step 1						
Friend instrumental support	0.04	0.08	0.06	0.18	0.18	8.74***
Familism	0.30	0.08	0.40***			
Step 2						
Friend instrumental support $\times$ Familism	-0.02	0.08	-0.03	0.18	0.00	0.07
<i>Friend emotional support</i>						
Step 1						
Friend emotional support	0.16	0.12	0.14	0.19	0.19	9.32 ***
Familism	0.29	0.08	0.39***			
Step 2						
Friend emotional support $\times$ Familism	-0.13	0.12	-0.11	0.21	0.01	1.15

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Fig. 1 Life satisfaction as a function of familism and family instrumental support

friend instrumental support main effect, $\beta = 0.06$, ns, or the friend instrumental support main effect, $\beta = 0.14$, ns, significant.

One might argue that support provided by the closest friendship may be more relevant to the life satisfaction of older adults than the mean friend support of three friends, who may be close or more distant. In view of this, we repeated the above analyses using quality of the closest friendship (i.e., the first friend mentioned by each participant). The results remained the same as those reported above.

Discussion

The present study compared the relative contribution of instrumental and emotional support from family members and friends to life satisfaction among Chinese older adults. Findings revealed that support from family members, especially emotional support, contributed more to life satisfaction of older adults than did support from friends. Older adults who received a higher level of emotional support from family members were more satisfied with life. In contrast, neither instrumental nor emotional support from friends was related to life satisfaction. The association between instrumental support from family members and life satisfaction was moderated by individual differences in familism. The positive association between instrumental support from family and life satisfaction was only significant for older adults with high or moderate familism, but not for those with low familism.

Findings from the present study provide further support for the claim that family support contributes to life satisfaction of older adults more than does friend support. This is consistent with previous research, which demonstrated the importance of family support over friend support on the psychological well being of older adults, in both Western cultures (e.g., Thompson and Heller 1990) and Eastern

cultures (e.g., Lee et al. 2005; Chou and Chi 2003). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the finding is in contrast to prior findings that friends are a better source of emotional support than do family members (e.g., Siu and Phillips 2002). These prior findings were generally explained in terms of the greater tendency for older adults to disclose to their friends, who are more likely than their family members to share similar socio-economic background and physical conditions with them (Novak 1997). Our finding can be reconciled with these prior findings by noting the collectivistic nature of the Hong Kong Chinese culture that our sample was living in. People in Hong Kong place a great deal of emphasis on close family relations (Lau 1981), with old-age support being the cultural norm (Liu et al. 1995). It might thus be both socially desirable and culturally appropriate for older adults in Hong Kong to disclose to their family members, thereby facilitating emotional support. In fact, emotional support from family members is so important among Hong Kong Chinese older adults that it was the only significant predictor of higher life satisfaction among our sample, when other types of social support were taken into account.

Probably because of this overwhelming importance of emotional family support, its effect on life satisfaction was not moderated by individual differences in familism. It was positively related to life satisfaction for older adults, regardless of familism. Yet, instrumental support's effect on life satisfaction depended on familism. In particular, instrumental support from family members predicted life satisfaction only among older adults with high and moderate levels of familism, but not among those with low familism. This might be the case because receiving instrumental support involves accepting material or physical assistance, which may have a negative impact on psychological well-being (Reinhardt et al. 1998) by showing the individual that he/she is dependent on and is a burden to the family (Ikkink and van-Tilburg 1998). In the case of older adults with a high or moderate level of familism, this may not be a problem because family members are treated as the in-group (Bardis 1959) and an extension of the self (Chan and Lee 1995). Depending on family members is effectively equivalent to relying on oneself. Moreover, instrumental support in times of need may represent the family's cohesion, which is conducive to satisfaction with life. However, for those who do not value the family as much, instrumental support may have no effect on life satisfaction because the perception of being dependent on family members may have offset the positive effect of instrumental support from family members on life satisfaction. The effect of emotional support on life satisfaction may be affected less by familism because accepting this type of support has less implication in one's ability to take care of oneself.

Limitations and directions for future studies

We acknowledge a few limitations of the study. As all our measures were self-reports, the levels of social support we measured might not necessarily reflect the actual states of the social relationships. In addition, our sample size was modest and included far more women than men. Although such a practice is common in aging research and gender did not correlate with the major variables in the study, having a more gender-balanced sample would have made our sample more representative and increased the external validity of our findings. In the present study, we only asked participants to name family members and friends who were so close to them that they could not imagine life without. Although this allowed us to control for closeness, it did not leave room for studying the effects of support from less close social partners. Future studies may consider analyzing the effects of support from social partners of different degree of closeness on well being. Finally, we only measured the instrumental and emotional aspects of support from family members and friends. Future studies may also include other measures on social relationships, such as exchange of social support, and study the relationship between these aspects of social relationships and psychological well being, which may also be influenced by cultural factors.

To conclude, the present study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, there has been controversy over the relative importance of family and friend support to older adults' psychological well being (e.g., Lee et al. 2005; Chou and Chi 2003; Siu and Phillips 2002; Chou and Chi 2001). The present study lent further evidence on the important role of family support, particularly emotional support, in older adults' life satisfaction. It may be more beneficial for older adults to work on enhancing cohesion and support among family members than to try to compensate for a lack of support from family with support from friends. Second, the present study directly tested the role of familism in moderating the associations between social support from family and friends, and life satisfaction. Findings suggest that while emotional support from family members may be universally beneficial, instrumental support from family members may not be beneficial to older adults who do not identify with the family.

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