OPTIMISM, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SELF-EFFICACY AMONG IRANIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract

Iranian students encounter difficulties and challenges during their study in Malaysia. The effects of these challenges increase psychological problems such as stress, anxiety, tension and depression. Obviously, students need to be aware of what can help them to reduce the negative effects of migration on their mental health and what actions to take for better adjustment and academic success. Confidence in the ability to use control over an individual's behavior, social environment, and motivation can be reflected by self-efficacy, or students' belief in their own abilities to manage specific conditions. Self-efficacy can play a role in not only how students feel about themselves, but whether or not they successfully achieve their goals and will help to better adjustment. Lack of comprehensive research on self-efficacy and its related factor among Iranian students in Malaysia motivated the researchers to conduct this study.

This study examines the relationship between optimism, dimensions of social support, demographic variables and self-efficacy among Iranian students of University Putra Malaysia (UPM). To achieve the aims of the study particular objectives were designed as follows:

1. To investigate significant differences in self-efficacy level across selected demographic variables (gender and marital status) among Iranian students in UPM,
2. To investigate the relationship between optimism, dimensions of social support and self-efficacy among Iranian students in UPM,
3. To investigate the extent to which optimism and dimensions of social support significantly predict the level of self-efficacy among Iranian students in UPM.

This study employed a descriptive correlational design. A number of 251 Iranian students from UPM participated in this research. Simple random sampling was used to collect the data.

The result of independent sample t-test showed no significant difference in level of self-efficacy across gender and marital status among Iranian students. The results of Pearson Correlation revealed positive correlation between optimism and dimensions of social support (family support, friends support and support from significant others) and self-efficacy. Moreover, the result of linear regression discovered that optimism and friends support were two significant predictors of self-efficacy among Iranian students.

The findings of the study provide practical contributions to the field of educational psychology. This study offers valuable information to lecturers, educators, counselors, psychologist about factors which contribute to self-efficacy. Moreover, the result can help authorities develop approaches to improve students' self-efficacy. The findings also provide social and psychological researchers with some features of personality and behaviors among individuals that need to be probed further.

Keywords: Self-efficacy, Optimism, Social support, Gender, Marital status, Iranian students.

1 INTRODUCTION

Iranian students encounter difficulties and challenges during their study in Malaysia. A study conducted by [21] among Iranian students of University Putra Malaysia, revealed that the target students were exposed to a variety of challenges during their studies. The challenges included lack of sufficient facilities (accommodation, transportation, food and campus restaurants), social environment (cultural difficulties, English difficulties and communication problems), academic problems (academic system, teaching methodology and faculty supervisor, lack of time, and unclear feedback), and international service program (lack of entertaining activities and the visa application process). Moreover, the Iranian Students' Association in UPM (ISAM) has reported that Iranian students encounter many problems and challenges in UPM. The main concerns of the students stem from financial issues, communication problems and academic difficulties [11]. As a result, the effects of
these challenges increase psychological and physiological problems such as stress, anxiety, tension, depression, loneliness, homesickness, low self-esteem, sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal among international students [10][22]. As reported by [14], it is necessary for all international students to undergo a period of adjustment to the different educational and social situations. Obviously, students need to be aware of what can help them to reduce the negative effects of migration on their mental health and what actions to take for better adjustment and academic success. Confidence in the ability to use control over an individual’s behavior, social environment, and motivation can be reflected by self-efficacy, or students’ belief in their own abilities to manage specific conditions [1]. Self-efficacy can play a role in not only how students feel about themselves, but whether or not they successfully achieve their goals and will help to better adjustment [19].

According to Bandura [2], self-efficacy is considered as a self-perception about the ability to do a precise behavioral task and the effects of selecting challenges or tasks tried, emotional responses to danger of failure and the degree of strength employed. A youth avoids testing challenges because of low self-esteem or a particular lack of self-efficacy. Based on Bandura’s [2] belief, undertaking challenges or defeating stressors is required for the improvement of self-efficacy. Shy or overprotected youths in adopting challenges are prevented by the need for increasing competencies and self-efficacy. Bandura also stated that only easy successes experienced by individuals make them expect fast outcomes, and failure can easily weaken their sense of efficacy.

Empirical studies revealed that self-efficacy varies from one individual to another and therefore is deemed as a variable depending on many other psychological factors. Literature revealed that optimism is a trait which is associated with self-efficacy. As stated by [18] optimism is the tendency to imagine positive consequences in the future. Past studies [4][15] identified a positive relationship between optimism and self-efficacy among students. Moreover, result of regression analysis among university students revealed significant contribution of optimism in deciding one’s self-efficacy (7). It seems social support is a variable related to self-efficacy. Social support is characterized as having some person to recommend help, when such help is required [8]. [25] Described social support as a trust of being cared for, and there is somebody to help in difficult situations. These supports can be real (financial support), informational (advice), companionship (belongings) and intangible (personal advice). Review of previous literature showed significant relationship between sources of social support and self-efficacy among students [23][24]. Additionally, the results of regression analysis discovered family support was significant predictor of self-efficacy [23]. According to the finding of [13] on the gender differences, revealed that gender is related with self-efficacy among student. Based on the result, girls are found to exhibit higher self-efficacy in areas related to language. The result of study conducted by [16] discovered that marital status had no statistically significant influence on self-efficacy while other studies showed significant difference between marital status and self-efficacy[16][3].

Despite the significant contribution of the self-efficacy concept and its important role in adjustment of international students to deal with their challenges in the host country, few researches have been conducted on self-efficacy and its related factors among Iranian students of university Putra Malaysia. Iranian student as highest number of international student in Malaysia and university Putra Malaysia are sample of this study. The gap addressed by this study is the lack of quantitative research on self-efficacy and its related factors among Iranian students, especially in Malaysia. In this regard, this research aims to investigate the relationship between optimism, social support and self-efficacy among Iranian students.

The specific research objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To investigate significant differences in self-efficacy level across selected demographic variables (gender and marital status) among Iranian students.
2. To investigate the relationship between optimism, dimensions of social support and self-efficacy among Iranian students.
3. To investigate the extent to which optimism and dimensions of social support significantly predict the level of self-efficacy among Iranian students.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study aims to investigate the relationship between optimism, social support and self-efficacy among Iranian students.
2.1 Research design, population, sampling method

The descriptive correlational design is employed by this study. Participant of this study consists of 251 (134 male, 117 female) Iranian students in University Putra Malaysia. To determine the sample size, for a one tailed test with a significance level of 0.025, power of 0.80 and medium effect size \( r = 0.30 \) a minimum of 251 participants are required [6]. The participants were nominated using simple random sampling.

2.2 Instrument

General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) comprises 10 items to measure self-efficacy [22]. The GSE assesses the optimistic self-beliefs to deal with some tough demands in life: e.g. “I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough”, “When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions”. Cronbach’s alpha was equal to 0.89.

The Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R) was adopted from Scheier and Carver (1985). LOT-R generalizes the outcome expectations and assumptions as stressed by Scheier and Carver’s theory of optimism [20]. The Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R) contains seven items that were developed to measure individual differences in generalized optimism. The level of student’s optimism was measured using: “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best”, “I’m always optimistic about my future”, “Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad”. Cronbach’s alpha was equal to 0.75.

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support was adopted from [25] to measure social support. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) is a brief research tool designed to measure perceptions of support from three sources: Family, Friends, and a Significant Other. The scale comprised of a total of 12 items, with four items for each subscale. Sample items included “There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows,” “My family really tries to help me,” and “I can talk about my problems with my friends”. Cronbach’s alpha was equal to 0.91.

All variables are valuable in a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach Alpha value of all the instruments exceeded 0.7 is satisfactory [10].

2.3 Data analysis

All analysis is performed with SPSS, Version 20. Descriptive statistics employed to reveal frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. In the part of inferential statistic, independent sample t-test used to show significant difference in level of self-efficacy across gender and marital status among Iranian students. Moreover, linear regression shows the direction of the relationship between dependent variable (self-efficacy) and independent variables (Optimism and dimensions of social support).

In regard of preliminary analysis, descriptive statistics and bivariate zero-order correlations are used for all variables presented. As reported in Table1, the cumulative mean of self-efficacy is 3.8 with a standard deviation of 0.53. The overall mean of optimism was 3.7 with a standard deviation of .57. The overall mean and standard deviation for friends support (Mean=3.4, SD=0.77), family support (Mean=3.7, SD=0.80), support from significant others (Mean=3.8, SD=0.83).

Pearson correlation is utilized to investigate the relationship between optimism, social support with three dimensions and self-efficacy among Iranian students. The result illustrates a significant strong and positive relationship between optimism and self-efficacy \( r=0.63, p<0.01 \). Also, findings reveals significant correlations between self-efficacy and friends support \( r=0.53, p<0.01 \), family support \( r=0.33, p<0.01 \), and support from significant others \( r=0.34, p<0.01 \).

To check the assumption of normality, skewness and kurtosis less than ±2 indicate normal distribution of data [14]. In this study Skewness and kurtosis for all variables are less than ±2.
Table 1. Descriptive statistics, reliability and Pearson Correlation between research variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Skewenes</th>
<th>Kurtisus</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>-0.59</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.63**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Friends support</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>-0.43</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Support from significant others</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>-0.81</td>
<td>-0.81</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *** Sig. at the 0.01 level

3 RESULT

According to Table 2, there is no significant difference in the level of self-efficacy across gender and marital status. Referring to the independent t-test result, the mean value of males and females are, respectively, 3.88 with SD=0.54 and 3.75 with SD=0.51. The mean value for single and married are, 3.81 with SD=0.55 and 3.82 with SD=0.51.

Table 2. Independent sample t-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mean difference</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>0.340</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 3, the standardized beta value revealed that there was a significant contribution of optimism with B =0.55 and friends support with B=0.43 in predicting the self-efficacy. Based on the ANOVA table, the model fits data with F=116.89, 31.03 and p<0.001.

Table 3. Linear regression with optimism, social support and self-efficacy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>10.81</td>
<td>116.89</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends support</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>14.32</td>
<td>31.03</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Significant at the 0.01 level

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between optimism, dimensions of social support and self-efficacy among Iranian students of University Putra Malaysia. In addition, this study examined the difference in self-efficacy level across gender and marital status among Iranian students. According to the findings of the study, there are significant relationships between dimensions of social support (family support, friends support and significant others), optimism and self-efficacy. The result is in line with other findings, for example, references [4][15][23][24] found relationship between optimism, social support and self-efficacy among students. Moreover, the result of the study showed that optimism and friends support are significant predictors of self-efficacy among Iranian students. The findings revealed that Iranian students who had higher level of optimism and friends support experience higher level of self-efficacy. The result confirmed the findings by reference [7][23] that optimism and friends support are significant predictors of resilience. It seems that the students’ tendency to imagine positive consequences in the future and received support from friends in a host country having significant effect on students’ belief in their own abilities to manage specific conditions capability to manage the environment.
The notion of self-efficacy has significant implications in the field of educational psychology in five main functions: assessment, intervention, consultation, research, and training. The result of this study can provide useful information to professionals who are working as counselor, psychologist and researcher on self-efficacy concept and its related factors among Iranian students. Furthermore, self-efficacy, optimism and dimensions of social support are skills which can be enhanced, taught and learned. With respect of this view, the authorities in charge of international students in universities and organizations are responsible to regulate policies to enhance the ability of the students to deal with the challenges with which they are faced. Therefore, awareness workshops and seminars should be held to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the students concerning self-efficacy and its relevant factors. Moreover, it is more feasible and probable to develop strategies that affect the classroom environment which improves both cognitive and affective learning outcomes, and also contributes to increasing students’ academic achievement. The current research is limited to a number of independent factors (optimism and social support). Future studies should consider more independent variables which can increase the level of self-efficacy among Iranian students such as: coping strategies and problem solving. Moreover, it is recommended that further studies use the longitudinal studies and reach to cause and effect results.

REFERENCES


