

The University of Hong Kong  
Department of Psychology

*Departmental Seminar*

***Toward a Relativistic Approach to Social Support***

Date: March 24, 2014 (Monday)  
Time: 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.  
Venue: Room 813, 8/F, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU  
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People depend heavily on various forms of assistance, guidance, and care for survival, which leads many to view social support as definitively beneficial. However, recent studies have provided the counterargument that social support is not necessarily a panacea for coping with stress. A considerable number of studies have been conducted on social support, yet the majority of the theoretical models developed to understand its influence have focused on its benefits, with few exploring the negative support effects from the relational aspect. No studies have attempted to explain support effects from the perspective of individual differences. More importantly, the underlying social support mechanism and the roles played by the different modes of social support remain unknown. Building on the available theoretical insights, a relativistic approach is adopted here to study social support.

A hybrid self-focus model of social support is proposed to understand the relationships between personality resources (specifically self-esteem) and levels of affect (positive and negative), the underlying mechanism of self-focus processes (public self-consciousness and social comparison), and the moderating role of the mode of social support (offline and online). The two studies incorporated correlational and quasi-experimental

methodologies conducted to examine the proposed model among participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Study 1 was correlational and applied a naturalistic categorization method to the mode of social support. This study showed that the focus of social comparison varied based on the levels of self-esteem and engagement in the offline and mixed modes of social support, but the findings were inconclusive regarding social comparison as the underlying mechanism. In addition, the analyses of public self-consciousness revealed puzzling results. Hence, the findings only provided partial support for the hybrid self-focus model of social support.

To clarify the counterintuitive findings revealed in Study 1, Study 2 adopted a quasi-experimental design to examine the mediating effects of self-focus processes on the relationship between self-esteem and levels of affect in two distinct modes of social support. One hundred and seventy-seven participants were included in the moderated mediation analyses, and the findings were largely consistent with the proposed model of public self-consciousness as the facilitating mechanism. Individuals' awareness of the self-referent aspects that were matters for public display explained the positive link between self-esteem and distress. Such positive indirect effect of public self-consciousness was particularly strong in offline social support.

In summary, the present project demonstrates that support effects are influenced by self-esteem, public self-consciousness, and the mode of social support. These findings provide unique insights that have not been examined by previous studies on social support. This project is the first attempt to address knowledge gaps by adopting a relativistic approach to social support. The subsequent discussion, implications, and future directions focus on a relativistic approach and the hybrid self-focus model of social support.