

Do psychology students matter to the society? Social support and their fear of failure

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ABSTRACT

The surge in demand for psychology professionals is followed by a similar rise in the intake of psychology students. Nevertheless, many psychology students suffer from the maladaptive fear that they will experience failure in their studies or future profession. Past studies suggested that their fear of failure (FOF) can be mitigated through social support, yet students across different educational levels may perceive such support differently. This research aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 3 or SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 4 (quality education) by addressing psychological well-being and supportive learning conditions that enhance students' academic and professional readiness. Purposive sampling was conducted to recruit 138 psychology students from all levels (Diploma, Bachelor, Master, and Doctorate) from universities in Malaysia and Indonesia. Data were collected using the online versions of the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory, General Mattering Scale, and Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, along with demographic questions and an informed consent form. Data analysis employed the Bootstrap method at 5,000 resampling with a 95% confidence interval using PROCESS Macro Model 59 for moderated mediation. The results suggested that mattering significantly and fully mediated the contribution of perceived social support to the development of FOF, and that education level did not significantly moderate the mediation, as the effect occurred among students at all levels. Limitations and suggestions are discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of psychology professionals is becoming increasingly important [1]. Accordingly, the global pandemic between 2019 and 2021 had emphasized the need of psychology professionals in various area, such as healthcare, education, workplace, family development, internet-supported interpersonal relationships, and even in prisons [2]. Simultaneously, the awareness of the demand of psychology professionals was also related to the increasing awareness of mental health general issues, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal behavior, and other types of mental health problems [3]. Apart from the ever-increasing demands of officially well-trained psychology professionals, psychology-related professions could not be considered easy; many psychology professionals reflect themselves as not adequately competent [4]. It seems that such issues have been started

since the day they were being trained; it was also reported that psychology professionals-in-training are not confident with their potentials [5]. Some of them fell into impostor phenomenon [6], fear of having language barriers [7], or even using self-handicapping strategy to avoid academic and professional success [8] or simply fear of failure (FOF) to secure potential jobs in the future [9].

It is significant to note that many students of psychology reported FOF both academically and professionally [10]. FOF leads to numerous negative attributes, such as procrastination habit [11], low learning motivation [12], and even problems with mental well-being [13]. Therefore, it is important to mitigate the formation of FOF among the students of psychology, as the society relies on them to fulfill the need of psychology professionals in the future [12].

This study focuses on investigating the roles of some socio-cognitive aspects that develop the FOF among students of psychology at various levels. First of all, it is important to know that psychology is not the most desirable field of study to most traditional Asian parents, compared to law, engineering, or medical [14]. Therefore, the first aspect we investigate is whether the students of psychology perceive that society gives them the support they need. The perceived social support (PSS), a perception that one is supported by people around them, was reported to be low among psychology students; it was indicated that traditional parents, older relatives, and general society do not consider psychology as their first option to encourage the younger generation to explore and study, and the situation plays significant role in nurturing lack of academic motivation among the students of psychology [15]. On the other hand, it is evident that the current job market and opportunities led the general society to support young individuals to study psychology even further, and it pushes the students of psychology to perceive the social support positively, and once perceived positively, social support would lead psychology students to more positive directions, such as higher learning motivation, higher professional identity, and higher working efficacy [16]. In other words, to ensure that the support provided by the society and educational institutions work positively for the students of psychology, they must perceive it as a positive support first [17]. The consequences can be reversed when the support provided by the society is perceived negatively by the students [18].

Studies reported more significant contribution of PSS rather than the received social support. PSS has been established as the subjective evaluation of the availability and adequacy of support from one's social network and a robust predictor to various positive elements in life, such as professional identity [19] quality of life [20], mattering and psychological well-being [21], as well as protective factor against social anxiety and depression [22]. Students who perceive that their immediate social environment, such as parents, peers, and educators support them academically would likely to be more optimistic that they would perform well [23].

Accordingly, PSS is also a significant protective factor against doubt of success and that might lead further to impostor syndrome [24]. Perceptions towards social support have also been reported to be used by individuals as a yardstick to measure themselves and decide whether they can accept themselves unconditionally [25]. Students with positive PSS are likely to accept themselves as comparable to other individuals in a healthy comparison [26]. As explained by self-determination theory (SDT) [27]; individuals who perceive that they are well-supported would have their 3 basic psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) fulfilled. As a results, individual who perceive that they are supported are less likely to develop fear of missing out (FOMO) in their social life, and therefore develop less fear of making mistakes, as they would not compare their weakness with other people's success [28].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Received and perceived social support

Providing social support is a natural responsibility of every caregiver, educator and mentor of any learner, and thereby, they guaranteed that every learner receives their support. Nevertheless, not every support is perceived properly by the learners. Moreover, supportive educators who were not perceived as supportive by their students would likely to increase negative learning behavior from their learners, such as demotivation or procrastination [29]. SDT by Ryan and Deci [30] explains that individuals who do not perceive that social support provides them with senses of autonomy, relatedness, and competence, will not be intrinsically motivated to perform better or develop higher efficacy of perform well. The 3 components in the SDT are related to the concept of mattering, the sense that one matters to other people, such as having their autonomy acknowledged, their competence relied upon, and their social presence related with [31].

2.2. Self-determination theory and mattering as the mediator

The concept of mattering itself has been studied in various setting, and it is established that PSS is a significant predictor of mattering [23], [32]–[34]. Some studies also suggested that students' perception that they are supported also fulfill their 3 basic needs mentioned in SDT, such as the needs to be related to others, the needs to feel competent at something important, and the needs for autonomy to achieve their goals the way

they want [35]. Consequentially, such fulfillments produce the intrinsic motivation to achieve, which mitigates the development of FOF as intrinsically motivated individuals are less likely to fear failure [36]. In our context, we hypothesize that students who perceive that the society supports them well would likely to feel that they matter more to the society and would be more likely to believe that they will prevail.

2.3. Level of education as the moderator

Nevertheless, different individuals might experience the phenomenon in different ways depending on their past experiences in the same field. Therefore, we were also interested in investigating whether the FOF was developed differently among different levels of psychology students. For instance, postgraduate students of psychology tend to develop FOF when they were not confident with the capability of their professors and mentors [10], while undergraduates tend to develop FOF when they were not confident about themselves [37]. The 2 studies suggested that the formation of FOF were different among students with different levels of education (LOE). Students at the higher levels tend to concern about whether they receive the social support they need, while their lower-level counterparts are more concern about their own capabilities [38]. Thereby, it is safe to assume that the more the psychology students are exposed to the knowledge, implication, and significance of psychological sciences, the more they would be confident on their own ability to perform academically well, therefore their FOF development would likely be mitigated.

Accordingly, psychology professionals, who perceive that they are no longer students of psychology, have their FOF mitigated by the sense that they are supported by their organizations [39], [40]. The implementation of SDT in the past studies brought us to hypothesize that while mattering might significantly mediate the negative contribution of PSS on FOF. The mediation would be moderated by the LOE; the higher the LOE, the more powerful the indirect effect of PSS on FOF through mattering. The hypothetical model is illustrated in Figure 1. It illustrates that LOE might interact with PSS in predicting mattering and FOF, while mattering mediates the contribution of PSS in mitigating FOF.

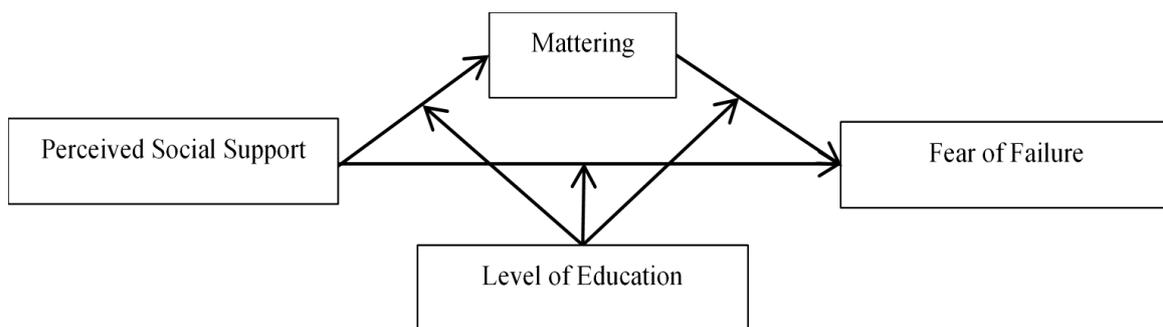


Figure 1. The hypothetical moderated mediation model

3. METHOD

3.1. Population and sampling

It was suggested by G*Power sample size calculator set into moderate power and 95% confidence interval with 3 predictors, a minimum sample size was 119. However, we recruited more than the minimum size, which was 138 to achieve higher accuracy. We conducted purposive sampling method with inclusion criteria currently registered as students in psychology at any level in higher education institutions in Malaysia and Indonesia. The purposive sampling was conducted as our research population is specifically students of psychology, and randomization might not be able to capture enough sample size within the limited time. The respondents were recruited online through our personal and professional social media accounts, and they have given their informed consent before responding to our scales.

3.2. Measures

The outcome variable, FOF was measured by using performance failure appraisal inventory (PFAI), capturing cognitive and emotional aspects of fear related to potential failure; its internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha reliability) to our sample was 0.945. The general mattering scale (GMS) by Elliot *et al.* [41] was utilized to measure the mediator variable, mattering; its internal consistency to our sample was 0.841. To gauge the predictor variable (PSS), we used the multidimensional scale of perceived social support (MPSPSS), with the Cronbach's alpha reliability of 0.924. The moderator variable (LOE) was taken as an ordinal data,

where 1 represents Diploma in Psychology, 2 represents Bachelor of Psychology, 3 represents Master of Psychology (from any specialization) and 4 represents Doctoral in Psychology (from any specialization). All scales were back-translated to Indonesian language, and the bilingual version of English-Indonesian language was distributed to the respondents from Indonesia, while the original English version was distributed to the respondents other than Indonesians.

3.3. Analyses

Bootstrap method was used to estimate the indirect effects of the mediator variables on the outcome variable under the condition of the moderator. The method was chosen as the traditional approaches to estimating indirect effects such as the Sobel test or the Baron and Kenny approach are known to be biased and lack statistical power. Bootstrap method overcomes these limitations by providing accurate and reliable estimates of the indirect effects, even when the sample size is small or the distribution of the data is non-normal; therefore, data can be analyzed without conducting prior assumption tests of normality, homoscedasticity, and others. Additionally, it can also provide confidence intervals for the indirect effects, which can be used to assess the statistical significance of the mediation effects [42]. Bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples in 95% Confidence Interval was employed to analyze the data. PROCESS Macro 4 model 59 for moderated mediation model with one moderator and one predictor, and one outcome variable.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Results

The summary of the Bootstrap analysis of the moderated mediation model through PROCESS Macro model 59 is depicted in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 suggests that the direct effect of PSS on FOF are not significant at any value of LOE, as there is the zero value between the upper limit confidence interval (ULCI) and lower limit confidence interval (LLCI) in every level of LOE (the LLCI are at negative values and ULCI are at positive values, hence there is zero value between them, indicating non significance contribution, confirmed by the p values, which are not smaller than 0.05 at any level of LOE). Table 2 depicts the conditional indirect effects. Table 2 suggests that the indirect effect of PSS on FOF through mattering is significantly negative across all LOE value. It indicates that the LOE do not significantly moderate the indirect effect of PSS on FOF through mattering. In other words, mattering fully mediates the mitigation effect of PSS on FOF among students of psychology at any level.

Table 1. Conditional direct effects of PSS on FOF

LOE	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Lo	0.016	0.103	0.215	0.215	-0.181	0.226
Mod	0.022	0.215	0.215	0.215	-0.181	0.226
Hi	-0.260	0.222	-1.172	-1.172	-0.596	0.177

Table 2. Conditional indirect effects of PSS on FOF

LOE	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Lo	-0.261*	0.075	-0.413	-0.118
Mod	-0.261*	0.075	-0.422	-0.117
Hi	-0.181*	0.134	-0.450	-0.079

Note: * p<0.05

4.2. Discussion

Our findings supported the first half of our hypothesis that mattering significantly and fully mediates the link of PSS and FOF among students of psychology at any levels. Nevertheless, the second half of our hypothesis, that the LOE would play the roles as conditions to allow the mediation of mattering occur is not supported, as the full mediation significantly occurred at all LOE. Schulze *et al.* [37] suggested that students at the postgraduate levels had their FOF developed by their concern of incompetent mentors or educators. While Loftus *et al.* [38] indicated that FOF among lower levels is mitigated by their confidence that they can perform academically well. Despite the 2 studies reported that the FOF is mitigated differently among students from different LOE, our studies indicated that mattering significantly and fully mediated the link between PSS and FOF at all values of LOE. It means that despite the fact that LOE might have interacted with PSS and mattering differently in mitigating FOF, the results are highly similar. When students feel supported, they would feel they matter, and therefore they will not be afraid of making mistake.

Our findings suggested that students would have significantly lower FOF when they can feel the support their social environment. Yet, it would not be significant without giving them the sense that they matter to others. This is in line with the previous reports; no matter how much the social support from the educational institutions, family, relatives, or friends is provided, the students would not show any meaningful difference if they do not perceive it as support [40]. In Asian contexts, psychology was not considered the most desirable field of study among traditional parents. Our findings are in line with the SDT. It states that when social support is perceived well, individuals would likely to feel their basic needs, such as the acknowledgement of their autonomy, relatedness, and competence are fulfilled [35], and they feel that their presence is more meaningful to the society [32]–[34]. Subsequently this sense of mattering improves their intrinsic motivation to contribute back to the society, which also provide them with higher confidence of not committing failure [36].

Our discoveries are not consistent with the works of Schulze *et al.* [37] and Loftus *et al.* [38] who suggested that individuals with different levels of experience and exposure to the field would likely to develop different ways in mitigating the formation of FOF in their respective fields. Although they reported the formation of FOF among postgraduate students is contingent upon their PSS, while the sense of mattering more significantly predicted FOF among undergraduate students. The current findings suggested that the sense of being supported and matter to others significantly mitigated the development of FOF among psychology students at all levels.

The current findings highlight the significance of PSS in mitigating the FOF among students of psychology at all levels. In other words, educational institutions, educators, trainers, and other stakeholders should provide the required support to the students of psychology, such as providing adequate and updated educators and mentors for the undergraduate and Diploma students, as well as competent and experienced academic supervisors for postgraduate students. Most importantly, these supporters must provide the learners with the sense that choosing psychology as their future profession matters to society. This sense that studying psychology is meaningful would arouse their intrinsic motivation to improve their study and provide them with confidence that they would not fall into failure.

This cross-sectional study is limited to the students of psychology, as the demand of psychology professionals was on the rise when this study was being planned. Such demand might have affected the surge of psychology student intake in many universities in Southeast Asia post pandemic. This timeline was considered a limitation as it might affect the results of this current study; therefore, our findings might not be used in consideration in decision-making in different timelines and different geographical locations. Longitudinal studies on the same topic are highly suggested, as well as similar studies for different fields. It is also suggested for future research be conducted in different geographical locations and nations, as the demographic differences might play a significant role in determining the results of our study.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, this study demonstrates that PSS reduces FOF among psychology students primarily by enhancing their sense of mattering, with this mechanism holding consistently across all levels of education. These findings underscore the importance of educational environments that not only provide instrumental and emotional support but also affirm students' value and societal relevance in choosing psychology as a field of study. However, given the study's cross-sectional design, discipline-specific focus, and regional context, future longitudinal and cross-cultural research is needed to verify the generalisability and temporal stability of these relationships. In other words, the provision of social support must be done properly to ensure proper increment of students' PSS that provides them the sense of social significance.

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This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : **O**riting - **O**riginal Draft

E : **E**riting - **R**eview & **E**ditng

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical clearance has been issued by the research department of Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences, University of Cyberjaya to collect the data for this current study with serial number of UOC/FPSS/2023(11).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study is available on request from the corresponding author, [KDP]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

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