

Relationship between Social Support and Resilience among Farmers from Punjab

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Abstract

Farmers are socially isolated, working for long hours without any opportunity for social interaction, which can lead to loneliness and poor mental health (Skerratt, 2018). The **present study aimed** to assess the relationship between perceived social support and resilience among farmers. For this purpose, a sample of 230 farmers aged 35-50 years was selected from various rural areas of Punjab. **Results** revealed a significant positive relationship between perceived social support and resilience. This finding has **implications** for mental health counsellors in enhancing resilience among farmers by highlighting the role of social support through family counselling and awareness campaigns. Families of farmers need to be educated with regards to their role in providing social support to the farmers in the face of difficult times, and farmers need psychoeducation about seeking social support without hesitation or inhibitions.

Keywords: Farmers, Resilience, Social Support, Punjab

Introduction

Even though Punjab produces a maximum amount of crops and high-quality wheat than any other state, the state has faced 10,000 suicides in the past ten years (Khanna, 2019). In Punjab, 1.6 lakh farmers are facing severe stress as they are under debt (Bharti, 2018). 85.9 per cent of agricultural households in Punjab are living under debt (Singh, Anupama, Kaur, Kaur & Kaur, 2019). This stands out to be especially true for small and marginal farmers in comparison with medium and large farmers.

From 1995 to 2015, 3, 18,528 farmers have committed suicide across India; with the latest statistics indicating 8 farmers every day (**Mirror Now,**

2017). “On an average, one farmer commits suicide every 30 minutes in India,” (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2011). These saddening statistics thus show that the heroes of our nation have unfortunately become victims of poor mental health due to several lapses at the governmental level, psychological level, and structural level.

Despite the abundance of **risk** factors, which lead to the deterioration of farmers’ mental health, there are several **protective** factors as well that can contribute to improved mental health. One such protective factor that can help farmers become resilient is that of **social support**.

At some point in life, most people are faced with adversities, such as an accident, death of loved ones, separation, break ups, illnesses, and so on. When exposure to such difficulties surpasses one’s limit of stress tolerance, it can result in a chronic and uncontrollable manifestation of depression, anxiety, burnout, or physical illnesses (Labonte & Turecki, 2012). During such times, resilience becomes much required to cope with stress.

Concept of Resilience

Resilience is defined as the ‘ability to bounce back and to withstand hardships by repairing oneself’ (Higgins, 1994; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). According to the American Psychological Association (2014), resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress.”

As per Masten (2004), resilience refers to the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, the function, or the development of that system. Some authors even view resilience as “the process to harness resources to sustain well being” (Panter-Brick, 2014).

Masten (2001) said that resilience occurs in the face of challenge and does not arise from superhuman effort and abilities. Resilience is defined as the ability to ‘rebound’ and regain original shape following trauma or shock (Oxford, 1989); and the promotion of positive adaptation under stress and adversity (Wagnild, 2003). Tugade and Frederickson (2004) stated that psychological resilience refers to effective coping and adaption, although faced with loss, hardship or adversity. Carle and Chassin (2004) reported that individuals with high levels of resilience are particularly

likely to use positive emotions to ‘bounce back’ from adverse experiences. Resilience is “an individual’s level of stability or quick recovery (or even growth) under significant adverse conditions” (Leipold & Greve, 2009). Resilience may change over time as a function of development and one’s interaction with the environment (Kim-Cohen & Turkewitz, 2012).

How does Perceived Social Support enhance Resilience?

According to Cobb (1976), people with social support believe that they are loved, respected and cared for, esteemed and valued, and that they are a part of a social network, such as, a family or community organization, that can provide goods, services, and mutual defence at times of need or danger.

According to Caplan, Cobb, and French (1975), social support provides an individual with a broader focus and positive self-image. Social support enhances the quality of life and provides a buffer against adverse life events (Cadwell & Boyd, 2009).

According to Cohen (2004), social support is a social network’s provision of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual’s capacity to cope with stress. Eisenber, Golberstein, and Whitlock (2013) defined social support as having or perceiving to have close others who can provide help or care, particularly during times of stress.

According to Southwick et al. (2016), there are many facets of social support:

1. **Structural social support** – the *size* and extent of an individual’s social *network*;
2. **Functional social support** – the perception that social interactions have been *beneficial* in terms of meeting emotional or instrumental needs
3. **Emotional, social support** – behaviour that fosters feelings of *comfort* leading the person to feel *loved, respected* and *cared* for by others
4. **Instrumental and material social support** – *goods* and *services* that can solve practical problems (Southwick et al. 2016)
5. **Informational/cognitive social support** – provision of *advice* or guidance to help individuals cope with current difficulties (Jiang, Wang, Zhang, Liu, et al., 2015).

In a study conducted on childhood abuse survivors, self-esteem and social support were found to be essential factors preventing PTSD development (Hyman, Gold & Cott, 2003). Studies have also shown that social support leads to the release of oxytocin, which reduces anxiety and cortisol response to stress. Through these neurobiological mechanisms, social support has been found to enhance resilience (Ozbay et al., 2007).

Therefore, social support is associated with resilience through psychological and behavioural mechanisms, such as, motivation to adopt healthy behaviours, gives a sense of safety, feelings of being understood, and increases a personal sense of control over events that are threatening (Southwick et al., 2016).

The rationale of the current study

Even though prior researches confirm the relationship between perceived social support and resilience among the general population, the same has been relatively unexplored among farmers per se. The sample of interest in the current study was that of farmers from Punjab because recent statistics report a horrifying rise in suicide rates among Punjabi farmers (National Crime Bureau Record, 2019). It is believed that through the role of social comfort and support, farmers would be able to mitigate the effects of adversities and cope in a better manner. Therefore, there is a dire need to study resilience, and it is positive correlates among farmers so that farmers will be well equipped to face the adversities of the farming profession healthily.

Hypothesis

Based on the review of literature, it was expected that there would be a significant positive relationship between Social Support and Resilience in relation to farmers' life.

Method

Sample

Two hundred thirty farmers were selected from rural areas of Punjab, India. The entire sample comprised of male farmers who were married and within the age range of 35-50 years (M age= 43, S.D=2.4). Only those farmers were selected who

were into this occupation from the past ten years. The land owned by these farmers was small and marginal because studies have found that small land farmers need more mental health services since they go through severe financial and emotional disturbances (Singh et al. 2019). To make the sample homogenous, farmers having large landholdings were excluded from the sample. Only those farmers were selected who were growing grains and pulses. Fruit and vegetable farmers did not form a part of this study.

Tests and Tools used:

- 1. Resilience in relation to Farmers' Life Scale (RFL) (Lal, Kadian, Jha, Singh, Goyal & Kumar, 2014)** - This scale measured resilience of farmers in relation to their overall quality of life. (Lal et al., 2014). In this scale, resilience was operationalized as the degree to which farmers bounced back in relation to their life after the national calamity.

Resilience in relation to farmers' life scale (RFL-Scale) was constructed to know the reason why farmers are committing suicide or what motivates them to cope up in their life despite of numerous hardships. Lesser the score in resilience scale more will be the suicidal tendency and vice versa. So, the scale is capable of measuring both the extreme of the

Continuum based on scores of the individual in the scale.

The scale consists of 18 (9 Positive and 9 Negative) statements on a 3 point continuum viz., Agree (A), Undecided (UD) and Disagree with a weightage of 3, 2, and 1 for positive statements and reverse scoring for negative statements, i.e. 1, 2 and 3. The maximum and minimum score ranges between 54 to 18.

The scale showed satisfactory internal consistency reliability of .87. Content validity of the scale was also found to be satisfactory.

- 2. PGI Social Support Questionnaire (P.G.I-S.S.Q) (Nehra, Kulhara & Verma, 1996)** – This scale measures the extent to which the individual feels cared or loved, esteemed and valued and that he belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation (Coff, 1976). It has been considered as an index of a wide variety of health, illness, recovery, coping situations and treatment outcomes (Nehra et al.1996).

The questionnaire consists of 18 statements with four response options from 4-most agreed to 1-least agreed. Seven items are positively worded and scored from 4 to 1, while the remaining 11 items are negatively worded and scored in the reverse order, i.e. 1 to 4. The total score indicates an individual's perceived levels of social support. Higher score indicates more perceived social support.

Test-retest reliability of the questionnaire ranges from .59 to .64. Concurrent validity of the questionnaire was established by correlating the scale with the Family Interaction Pattern scale by Bhatti, Krishna and Ageira (1986). Discriminant validity of the questionnaire was also found to be satisfactory by being able to discriminate between mentally normal individuals and neurotic individuals (Chakrabarti, Kulhara & Sharma, 2005; Mishra, Pandey, Joby & Jha, 2014). The scale has also been validated on clinical patients along with the normal population.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated viz. means and standard deviations. After checking for the assumptions of normality and linearity, Pearson's Product Moment intercorrelation analysis was carried out.

RESULTS

Table 1 showing descriptive statistics and correlation between social support and resilience in farmers

Variables	Means	S.D
1. Social Support	41.47	6.31
2. Resilience in Relation to Farmers Life	37.54	4.65
<i>r</i> = .537**		

p < .01**

The scores of Social Support ranged from 17 to 55, with a mean of 41.47 and S.D of 6.31. The scores of Resilience in relation to Farmers' Life ranged from 23 to 50, with the mean of 37.54 and S.D of 4.65. Pearson's product-moment correlation

turned out to be significant ($r=.537$, $p<.01$), thus indicating a significant and positive relationship between perceived social support and resilience among farmers.

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to find the association between resilience and social support. The harmful effects of lack of social support have been well documented along with the positive and protective effects of having social support (Southwick et al., 2016). Farmers are socially isolated, working for long hours without any opportunity for social interaction, which can lead to loneliness and poor mental health (Skerratt, 2018). One such protective role played by social support is that of building resilience. The results of the current investigation turned out in line with the proposed hypothesis. The same can be confirmed in prior studies.

McLaren and Challis (2009) administered measures of depression, suicide ideation, social support and sense of belongingness to 99 farmers in Australia. The findings showed support for a compensatory model of suicide ideation, indicating that even though depression contributes to suicide ideation (positively) and sense of belongingness contributes to suicide ideation (negatively), however, having high levels of sense of belonging was found to compensate for the effects of high levels of depression. Farmers experiencing more number of protective factors were able to overcome depression, whereas farmers having less number of protective factors such as lack of sense of belongingness were not able to counteract suicide ideation thoughts. Therefore, it shows that for farmers, having a sense of feeling loved is very important as it contributes to resilience.

The findings of this study implied that increasing levels of social support might help in weakening depression-suicide relationship among farmers (McLaren & Challis, 2009).

Naik (2016) studied issues related to reduced well being among farmers across several countries. Farmers reported a lack of social support and reduced levels of resilience due to their remote geographical location. Further, remote rural areas where they worked lacked facilities that were available in the cities. This remoteness reduces their access to social support systems, such as hospitals, friends and family, counsellors, etc.

In a study conducted by McManu et al. (2012), predictors of resilience were identified through a sample of 115 farmers. The results revealed that feelings of belongingness, local economy, and community spirit played a significant role in enhancing farmer's resilience. Social cohesion or social support was the most important predictor of resilience among this sample of farmers. It helped farmers fight isolation, deal with competition amongst themselves, and brought about the various benefits of socialisation.

A report of well being on farmers (Schirmer, Yabsley, Mylek & Peel, 2016), identified some factors that helped in building their resilience and adaptive capacity. Results showed social capital to be an important determinant of well-being among farmers. This was characterised by reports of spending time with friends and family, getting involved in local community work, sense of belongingness, trust, and cooperation among farmers and their coworkers. Factors other than social support were perceived the health of the ecosystem, access to services and infrastructure, crime and safety, having a say and being heard, equity and inclusion, general health, confidence in skills and education, community leadership and collaboration, and economic well being.

In an extensive review of social support and its relationship with resilience, Southwick et al. (2016) found that social support contributes to the development of individual attributes, such as, enhances emotional intelligence and regulation of negative emotions, leads to the ability to soothe oneself, to solve problems efficiently, sustain friendships and intimate relationships and also enhances one's sense of self-efficacy. This entire cluster of variables leads to the formation of a resilient mindset. Researchers even found social support to be associated with resilience by motivating the individual to adopt positive health behavioural patterns and give up risky behavioural patterns (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010).

Southwick et al. (2016) also stated that positive social support inhibits fear-related systems of the brain, while lack of social support activates neurobiological systems associated with fear and stress (Eisenberg et al., 2013). The same brain structures that are involved in positive social support are also involved in resilience, such as, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, ventral anterior cingulate cortex, right

dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and caudate. Activation of these centres of the brain through the role of social support helps in triggering the feelings of safety. Therefore, based on such findings, psychological interventions are much desired to increase resilience among farmers by targeting their social support systems at micro-level and macro-level (Eisenberg et al., 2013).

One important variable that explains the relationship between social support and resilience is that of hope. Vartak (2015) studied the role of social support and hope in resilience among cancer patients. Regression analyses revealed both social support and hope to be emerging as significant predictors of resilience, which implies that working with these variables at an early stage can improve the mental health of individuals and prevent them from falling prey to depression. Hope and social support must be focused upon in the very beginning before the individual begins to lose faith in life and begins to deteriorate in his or her levels of resilience. This can be achieved through the supportive role of friends and family (Goldzweig, Baider, Andritsch & Rottenberg, 2016).

The association between resilience-related variables and social support has also been examined among individuals with medical ailments. It is common for individuals with serious physical ailments to be suffering from depressive symptoms and requiring stronger social support in order to bounce back and recover at a faster pace (Anderson, Deshais & Jobin, 1996). Considering how social support can provide relief to such patients, Bao, Li, Guan et al. (2018) studied the association between hope, depressive symptoms, and social support. The authors found that after controlling for demographic information, social support accounted for 19% variance in depressive symptoms, followed by hope, which added 9% variance to the model. Lower levels of hope were associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. The study found that much of the relationship between social support and depression is explained by hope. Interventions working upon hope building can help in building resilience since hope and resilience are closely aligned constructs and both respond well in enhancing satisfaction, happiness, health, and longevity (Schneider, 2001; Duggal, Zimmerman & Liberta, 2016).

Continuing on the same lines, Wang, Zhao et al. (2019) also studied the relationship between resilience and social support. Resilience was studied as a mediating factor between social support and quality of life in patients with serious blindness (glaucoma). Both social support and resilience were found to emerge as significant predictors of quality of life. Further, the relationship between social support and quality of life was found to be significant because of resilience. Since resilience levels are already low in patients with blindness, improvements in resilience can be fostered by enhancing perceived social support. The more social support is given to such patients, the better reports of subjective well-being and quality of life can be observed (Engert, Koester, Riephausen & Singer, 2016).

Lack of social support has some deteriorating consequences for farmers. Sun et al. (2009) studied the association between loneliness, growth and social relationships. A sample of 1144 older adults were administered questionnaires regarding loneliness, social support, family functioning, and its dimensions viz. family adaptability, partnership, growth, affection, and resolve. Overall, as hypothesised, both social support and family functioning were found to be negatively related to loneliness. Moreover, loneliness was also found to be negatively associated with personal growth, family adaptability, family affection, partnership in family, social support and utilisation of social support. Stepwise multiple regression analyses revealed high scores on loneliness to be negatively associated with lower scores on social support, and worse scores on family well-being or family functioning.

Since loneliness is a major problem arising out of perceived lack of social support among farmers (Cunnane, 2016), the findings of the current study can help one conclude that minimising loneliness through family counselling and providing social support to the farmers is much needed. Mental health service centres must be initiated in rural areas of Punjab to develop psychological interventions for farmers who experience loneliness and reduced levels of resilience. If farmers are better supported and cared for, their negative psychological consequences might be prevented or at least reduced (Chan & Lee, 2006; Wu et al., 2010).

In a recent study, 426 participants with substance use disorders were assessed on measures of resilience, social support, stress and life satisfaction (Yang, Xia, Han

& Liang, 2018). Stress was found to be negatively related to social support, resilience and life satisfaction, whereas life satisfaction was found to be positively related to social support and resilience. The mediational analysis showed that the direct pathway from stress to life satisfaction was insignificant. The relationship between stress and life satisfaction only emerged to be significant through the mediating roles of resilience and social support. This means that social support and resilience can decrease stress, and as a result, increase life satisfaction (Shie, Wang, Bian & Wang, 2015). Therefore, implementing therapies that target stress management and highlight the role of social support can help farmers improve their levels of life satisfaction and resilience.

The effect of depression, different types of social support, self-efficacy and different coping mechanisms was studied on resilience among women with breast cancer (Larasati, Adriana & Murti, 2018). Results showed resilience to be directly affected by depression, family support, group support, self-efficacy and coping mechanisms. These findings indicated that strong family support influences the ability of the individual to bounce back. It also implies that support from friends and closest people has an impact on psychological and emotional reactions to stress (Pasipanodya et al., 2012). The role of other cancer patients in providing group support also enhanced resilience. This is because community support can enhance the spirit of faster recovery by sharing similar experiences (Costa et al., 2017). Therefore, it can be seen that social support is a multifaceted concept. Providing farmers with domain-specific social support will go a long way in enhancing their resilience instead of overall social support. For instance, group community support, support from family and relatives, support from friends and support from local banks and government policies would be ideal and beneficial to their mental health.

The study has implications as it can be used by policymakers to engage farmers in active socialisation so that they don't get overwhelmed by the challenges that they face. Resilience is not based on a single factor but a combination of economic, social and individual issues. Special attention needs to be paid to each one of them.

While immense research literature highlights the role of social support in times of distress and agony, investigating the role of perceived social support in building farmers' levels of resilience relatively remains unexplored. Enhancing resilience and creating sustainable, supportive ecosystems can play a pivotal role in dealing with the crisis faced by our farmers.

Conclusion and Implications

To develop interventions targeting farmers' resilience building, it is important to understand that humans are embedded in families, organisations, and communities. Interventions targeted at these levels will go a long way in building resilience. Mental health counsellors in rural areas must psycho-educate farmers and their families about the importance of seeking and providing emotional support and instrumental support to fight stressors. Communities can provide resilience by focusing on the job training, financial support, advice-giving and counselling (Bonanno, Masten, Brick, Yehuda & Southwick, 2014). Instilling a sense of belongingness may be important in building a nation of resilient farmers who are ready to face any stress via the protective role of social support and feelings of comfort and safety.

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