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Journal

American Journal of Public Health, 98(6)

ISSN

0090-0036

Author

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Publication Date

2008-06-01

DOI

10.2105/ajph.2008.133728

Peer reviewed

LETTERS

ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT ON ADOLESCENTS WITH PARENTS WITH HIV/AIDS

Lee et al.'s article is significant, as HIV/AIDS has spread to epidemic proportions.¹ Social support from family and friends is indeed an important contributor of a better quality of life among HIV-affected families and their adolescents.

However, I would like to highlight a few pertinent issues regarding the article. First and foremost, Lee et al. were only restating what is already known and did not contribute anything new to the existing literature on the significance of social support. The fact that the data they used are more than 10 years old raises concerns about the validity of certain findings, especially in the context of the enormous advancement in the field of HIV/AIDS treatment and care.

The authors state that there is a "lack of a reliable, general, and convenient index of social support,"¹(p1820) which was their own limitation as well. I believe that there would be a significant difference in the degree of depression as well as in the protective effect of social support on adolescents according to their parent's stage of disease. Lee et al. did not provide adequate information on the effect of



Keith Maynard and Chip McLaughlin, having filed for a marriage license in the early hours of May 17, 2004, respond to the greetings of the jubilant crowd outside of Cambridge City Hall in Boston, Massachusetts. Photograph by Marilyn Humphries. Printed with permission.

stage of disease. Because the authors used the Brief Symptom Inventory² to measure the levels of depressive symptoms, it would have been more appropriate to refer to them as "depressive symptoms" rather than "depression," which gives the impression of a diagnosis on the basis of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*.³

The statistical analysis and the results would have been clearer if the authors had depicted the models and provided the values. At this point we are left to take the authors' word for the above findings without having a value for validation. Lee et al. did not give any information on the nature of social support, which would have been useful for planning and implementing intervention programs for HIV-affected families.

Lastly, it was very disappointing to see several typographical errors (pp 1820–1821) in a high-impact journal such as the *American Journal of Public Health*. ■

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This article was accepted January 2, 2008.

doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2007.133140

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from the National Institutes of Health Fogarty International Center (grant TW 005811, LB Cottler, principal investigator).

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LEE RESPONDS

I appreciate Varma's letter and read it with great interest. My coauthors and I agree that social support has an important effect on the mental and behavioral outcomes of HIV-affected adolescents.

Our study did not restate what is already known on the significance of social support for HIV-affected adolescents, a unique group with multiple challenges and stressors (e.g., stigma, unstable housing, parental drug use, parental death resulting from AIDS). Empirical investigations of the relationship between social support and mental and behavioral outcomes of HIV-affected adolescents are limited. My coauthors and I acknowledged in our study that the data we used were more than 10 years old, but our unique sample provided an opportunity to empirically examine the effect of social support among HIV-affected adolescents.

We agree with Varma that parents' stage of HIV would play an important role in the impact of social support on adolescents' outcomes. We conducted a series of sensitivity analyses to adjust for parental stage of HIV. The findings were robust across all the models presented in our study.

We used the Brief Symptom Inventory, a short validated alternative to its parent instrument, the SCL-90-R (Symptom Checklist-90-Revised), to measure adolescents' level of depressive symptoms. We acknowledged that it is not a clinical diagnostic tool, but when we conducted a supplemental study among a subset of the adolescents in this study to compare the Brief Symptom Inventory with the Composite International Diagnostic Interview (a clinical diagnostic tool based on *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*¹), we found a significant correlation between the 2 diagnostic tools.²

For data analysis, we estimated mixed-effect models with an autoregressive covariance structure to account for the repeated measurements. We presented the 95% confidence intervals and *P* values of our models, per *Journal* guidelines, but also excluded the parameter estimates from the tables to adhere to the same guidelines. The significance of the findings was captured by the 95% confidence intervals and *P* values presented.

Our findings did suggest significant protective (size of social support) and risk factors (negative role model influence) correlated with adolescent outcomes, which would be useful in designing and implementing intervention programs for HIV-affected adolescents. We hope that the empirical evidence provided in our study will help inform and facilitate the research community to conduct further research on the development of reliable social support indices for HIV-affected adolescents. ■

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This letter was accepted January 8, 2008.

doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2008.133728

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