

THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD SOCIAL SUPPORT AND ENVIRONMENTAL
UNPREDICTABILITY ON ATTACHMENT STYLES

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THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD SOCIAL SUPPORT AND ENVIRONMENTAL
UNPREDICTABILITY ON ATTACHMENT STYLES

by

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In a world in which Sigmund Freud's theory that the two basic human motivations of sex and aggression was widely accepted, the notion that there exists a fundamental human "need to belong" was a major shift (Baumeister, 1995). Their hypothesis suggested that belonging was a need rather than a desire due to the mental and physical issues that arise in people who lack it. The need to belong is deeply rooted and permeates our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Allen, 2021). The evidence collected following their original paper in 1995 was astounding, it being cited over 30,000 times (Baumeister, 1995). Although the need to belong has been demonstrated through several empirical sources following the original research, not all social interactions fulfill this need. There are positive and neutral interactions that can contribute to a sense of mutual caring in an individual, therefore increasing one's sense of belonging, but not having these interactions can be detrimental. Maintaining healthy relationships, characterized by positive and neutral interactions, is crucial due to the fundamental human need for belonging. One's attachment style shows how individuals go about forming relationships in which these interactions will be had.

Attachment styles refer to the patterns of behavior and thought that individuals develop in relationships. These styles shape the way individuals connect, relate to, and depend on others throughout their lives. There are several attachment styles, ranging from insecure to secure. An attachment style considered insecure might inhibit one's ability to experience social connectedness. This can lead to social isolation, or "the lack of relationships with others and little to no social support or contact", which increases the risk for heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, addiction, suicide, and more (CDC, 2023a). The formation of close and healthy relationships is important to a person's well-being because of these reasons, but, for those with an insecure attachment, can prove quite difficult.

People develop an initial sense of attachment within the first six months of their lives based on how consistently their primary caregiver (generally the mother) responded to our needs (Ross & Hill, 2002). A secure attachment style in adulthood “combines a positive internal working model of attachment of oneself, characterized by a view of oneself as worthy of love, and a positive internal working model of attachment of others, characterized by the view that others are generally accepting and responsive” (Secure Attachment, n.d.). However, when that caregiver either does not consistently respond to the child’s needs or ignores them entirely, children can develop insecure attachment styles. When the caregiver provides needs inconsistently, it often leads to anxious attachment which is “characterized by a negative internal working model of attachment of oneself and of others. Individuals with fearful attachment doubt both their own and others’ competence and efficacy and are presumed not to seek help from others when in distress” (Fearful Attachment, 2014). When the caregiver ignores them entirely, it is likely to lead to dismissive attachment which “combines a positive internal working model of attachment of oneself, characterized by a view of oneself as competent and worthy of love, and a negative internal working model of attachment of others, characterized by one’s view that others are untrustworthy or undependable. Individuals with dismissive attachment are presumed to discount the importance of close relationships and to maintain rigid self-sufficiency” (Dismissive Attachment, n.d.). Insecure attachment styles lead to many adverse mental health outcomes.

Levels of anxiety and depression tend to be higher within a person with an insecure attachment style than a person with a secure attachment style. Specifically, those with avoidant attachment styles tend to have higher levels of depression. They found that subjects with secure attachment styles were generally “less anxious, less impaired, and less depressed than the participants with an anxious attachment style” (Crayton, 2010). In another study, it was found

that lower levels of perceived social support within the family could be linked with higher levels of psychological distress, both of which can be associated with high levels of family unpredictability. Family unpredictability can be described as “a lack of consistency in family behaviors and regulatory systems” (Ross & Hill, 2000).

This study seeks to investigate whether perceived social support from friends and surrounding community has any impact on the potential impact of environmental unpredictability in childhood on a person's attachment style, this. The researchers hypothesize the following: people who were raised with predictable childhoods and had high amounts of perceived social support are likely to have a secure attachment style. Conversely, people who were raised with predictable childhoods but did not have high amounts of perceived social support are more likely to have insecure attachment styles than those in the first group. Additionally, people who were raised with unpredictable childhoods but had high amounts of perceived social support are more likely to have insecure attachment styles than those in the first hypothesis. Overall, this study will investigate the influence of perceived social support from different sources on the attachment styles of people who experienced unpredictable childhoods. The importance of outside support to a person will be examined.

Methods

Participants

A total of 135 participants were recruited for the study. The participants were students taking the PSYC 1000 course in the Fall of 2023. They completed this survey for required research credits for the course, but another avenue was available to students who did not wish to

partake in any studies. Specifically, half credit was awarded towards the research requirement for students who participated in this study.

Methods and Procedures

In this survey, participant's attachment style, perceived levels of social support within and outside of the family, and the levels of unpredictability within a person's childhood were assessed. The tools were used to assess the relationship between perceived social support from outside sources and attachment style in those with unpredictable childhoods. The study was conducted on Qualtrics for the purpose of ensuring the participants can complete it at their own convenience and with their preferred level of privacy. The tools used were the Adult Attachment Questionnaire, the Questionnaire of Unpredictability in Childhood, and Perceived Social Support in Families, Friends, and Community. We also retrieved information on the participants' demographics. The order of presentation for the instruments will be randomized, with the AAQ administered first followed by the remaining measures. Demographic information and subjective SES will be collected at the conclusion of the survey.

The Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ) (see appendix A) was developed by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver in their 1998 study, "Self-report measurement of adult attachment: An integrative overview". This 17-item tool is used to evaluate an adult's attachment style, employing the usage of a Likert-type scale. The participants rated their agreement with each item, where choosing 1 meant they strongly disagreed and choosing 7 meant they strongly agreed. The statements themselves measured levels of anxiety (the amount of confidence one has in themselves) and avoidance (the amount of confidence one has in others).

The QUIC (see appendix B) was created by Glynn et al in 2019 to assess the level of unpredictability experienced in a person's childhood environment. The instrument has two sections. The first section assesses the participant on information as it pertains to their experience prior to age 12, and the second section assesses the participant on information as it pertains to their experience prior to age 18. The participants answer dichotomously. They are provided with 38 items that they answer with either yes or no.

The PSS-Fa, or Perceived Social Support from Family (see appendix D), was adapted from Procidano and Heller's (1983) scale. It is made up of 20 items assessing how much support a participant believes they received from their family members. The PSS-Fr, or Perceived Social Support from Friends (see appendix C), is structured similarly to the PSS-Fa, but instead assessed the amount of support a participant believed they received from their friends. Participants are given statements, such as "my family gives me the moral support I need", and they can answer with "yes", "no", or "I don't know". It is worth noting that for the PSS-Fa and the PSS-Fr, the "I don't know" option was replaced with "maybe" for this study.

Referred to as the Social Support Rating Scale (see appendix E) in the original study, participants' perceptions of support from their community. To better specify what the scale was measuring, the group nicknamed it PSS-Com, or perceived social support from community. Specific items will gauge participants' perceptions of support from various community sources using a similar response format. Adaptions were necessary to enhance clarity due to the usage of slang in the original source that did not translate well into American English. For clarity, the group separated the instrument into three sections. The first section analyzed how many close friends the participant had from specific age ranges, living situation, and levels of interaction with various individuals/activities in the community. The second section assessed general levels

of perceived support from various sources, such as parents, siblings, friends, and members in the community. The third section assessed levels of perceived economic and emotional support from the same sources.

Results

Two multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictors of attachment style. The first only considered perceived social support from family and friends, excluding perceived social support from community and the unpredictability of a participant's childhood environment as variables. The analysis significantly predicted attachment style ($F(2, 132) = 23.026, p < .001$), accounting for 25.9% of the variance. Perceived social support from both family ($\beta = -.27, p = .001$) and friends ($\beta = -.378, p < .001$) were shown to have a significant negative correlation with attachment style, indicating that higher levels of support from these sources were associated with lower attachment style scores.

The second analysis considered the effects of environmental predictability in childhood and perceived social support from family, friends, and community on attachment style. This analysis also significantly predicted attachment styles ($F(4, 130) = 17.222, p < .001$), explaining 34.6% of the variance. Perceived social support from family was not determined to be a significant predictor in this model ($p = .745$), but support from friends ($\beta = -.302, p < .001$) and community ($\beta = -.186, p = .035$) were both significantly negatively correlated with attachment style. Finally, childhood unpredictability ($\beta = .284, p = .002$) was positively correlated with attachment style.

Tests of between-subjects effects were conducted to assess the impact that perceived social support and environmental unpredictability in childhood had on attachment styles.

Multivariate tests showcased the following: Perceived social support from family is not shown to have a statistically significant impact on avoidance ($F(1,130) = .060, p = .806$) or anxiety levels ($F(1,130) = .026, p = .872$). Perceived social support from friends is not shown to have a statistically significant impact on anxiety ($F(1,130) = 3.104, p = .080$) but is shown to have a statistically significant impact on avoidance levels ($F(1,130) = 14.352, p < .001$). Perceived social support from community was not found to have a statistically significant impact on avoidance ($F(1,130) = 3.185, p = .077$) or anxiety levels ($F(1,130) = 3.185, p = .058$). Predictability of a child's environment was found to have a statistically significant impact on avoidance ($F(1,130) = 4.948, p < .03$) and anxiety levels ($F(1,130) = 8.143, p = .005$).

Discussion

In this study, participants that reported having a secure environment in their childhood showcased low levels of anxiety and avoidance. The impact that this has pales in comparison to the significance perceived social support from friends has on avoidance levels. The F values from the between-subjects test conducted showcased the impact each variable had on avoidance and anxiety levels (see figure 1). Larger numbers correlate with increased impact on the variable. Knowing this, the variable with the largest impact observed was perceived social support from friends on anxiety levels. Although unpredictability in childhood is a significant predictor of attachment styles, the variable with the highest influence would be perceived social support from friends.

While perceived social support from family was shown to predict attachment styles of participants when considered independently, the significance was lost when variables (such as PSS-Com and QUIC) were considered. Additionally, the PSS-Fr was not shown to predict

anxiety levels in participants and the PSS-Com was not shown to predict neither anxiety nor avoidance levels. As mentioned previously, the PSS-Com was derived from a convoluted scale that required much doctoring to be useable. If this scale were more refined, it is possible that perceived social support from community would have been shown to have a larger impact on attachment styles. Moreover, the sample size was 135. It is also possible that a larger sample size would have helped push these variables into significance.

Despite the insights gained, this study is not without limitations. The instruments used are reliant on the perspective of participants, which may or may not be skewed based on the actual reality of the events that they are recalling. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small in comparison to other studies, which could indicate information that is not entirely representative of the entire population. It is also worth noting that all scales used in this study rely on participants' perspectives, which may deviate from the actual reality of the events that they are recalling. This raises important questions about the impact a person's perspective has on their mental and relational outcomes, which future research could investigate.

This study was formulated with the hope that the information obtained would prove the importance of a person seeking support from outside their family. The significance and impact of perceived social support from friends on anxiety levels in a person corroborates the notion that it is vital for people to seek out friends that they can trust and rely on. Future research on this topic may help solidify future directions, but a program that encourages building healthy friendships in schools may have a positive impact on a child's anxiety levels. The need to belong is present in all humans, and fostering a sense of belonging in children amongst their peers can prove to be vital in the formation of relationships for the rest of a person's life.

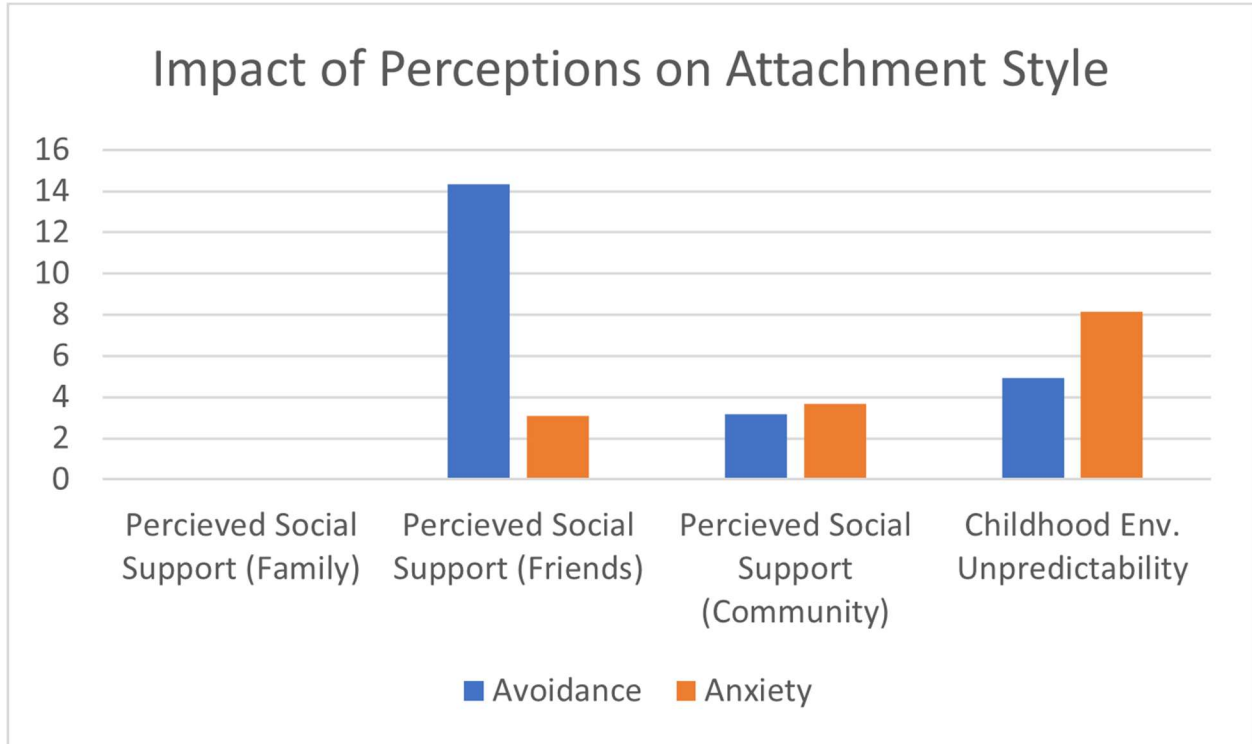
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Figure 1

Impact of Perceptions on Attachment Style



Appendix A

Adult Attachment Questionnaire

AAQ: Adult Attachment Questionnaire

Instructions: Please read each of these items and indicate whether you agree or disagree with them using the scale provided. Use a 7-point scale: 1= I strongly disagree to 7 = I strongly agree.

- ___ 1. I find it relatively easy to get close to others. (Reverse)
- ___ 2. I'm not very comfortable having to depend on other people.
- ___ 3. I'm comfortable having others depend on me. (Reverse)
- ___ 4. I rarely worry about being abandoned by others. (Reverse)
- ___ 5. I don't like people getting too close to me.
- ___ 6. I'm somewhat uncomfortable being too close to others.
- ___ 7. I find it difficult to trust others completely.
- ___ 8. I'm nervous whenever anyone gets too close to me.
- ___ 9. Others often want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.
- ___ 10. Others often are reluctant to get as close as I would like.
- ___ 11. I often worry that my partner(s) don't really love me.
- ___ 12. I rarely worry about my partner(s) leaving me. (Reverse)
- ___ 13. I often want to merge completely with others, and this desire sometimes scares them away.
- ___ 14. I'm confident others would never hurt me by suddenly ending our relationship. (Reverse)
- ___ 15. I usually want more closeness and intimacy than others do.
- ___ 16. The thought of being left by others rarely enters my mind. (Reverse)
- ___ 17. I'm confident that my partner(s) love me just as much as I love them. (Reverse)

The avoidance items are: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

The anxiety items are: 4, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

Citation:

Simpson, J.A., Rholes, W.S., and Phillips, D. (1996). Conflict in close relationships: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, 899-914.

Appendix B

Questionnaire of Unpredictability in Childhood

Oct 2018

Questionnaire of Unpredictability in Childhood (QUIC)
Glynn et al., (2019)

Instructions and Items:

This set of questions asks about your childhood experiences. When we say parents, we mean whoever in your life fills that role for you (e.g. biological parents, step parents, grandparents, foster parents). This could be one person, or this could be multiple people. Please list those people's relationship to you below:

First, we are going to ask about a specific part of your childhood, which is when you were less than 12 years old. These answers should be based on your own memories prior to the age of 12, not on things you later learned from your parents or others.

Please answer these questions based on your typical or average experiences.

Typical or average experiences from earliest <u>memory to age 12...</u>	Yes	No
1. I had a set morning routine on school days (i.e., I usually did the same thing each day to get ready).	1	0
2. My parents were often late to pick me up (e.g. from school, aftercare or sports).	1	0
3. My parents kept track of what I ate (e.g., made sure that I didn't skip meals or tried to make sure I ate healthy food).	1	0
4. My family ate a meal together most days.	1	0
5. My parents tried to make sure I got a good night's sleep (e.g., I had a regular bed time, my parents checked to make sure I went to sleep).	1	0
6. I had a bedtime routine (e.g., my parents tucked me in, my parents read me a book, I took a bath).	1	0
7. In my afterschool or free time hours at least one of my parents knew what I was doing.	1	0
8. I usually knew when my parents were going to be home.	1	0
9. At least one of my parents regularly checked that I did my homework.	1	0

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Appendix B (cont.)

Oct 2018

Now we are going to ask you about your experiences from birth to age 18 (or your whole life, if you are less than 18 years old). Again, this should be based on your own memories prior to the age of 18, not on things you later learned from your parents or others.

Please answer these questions based on your typical or average experiences.

Typical or average experiences from <u>earliest memory to age 18</u> ...	Yes	No
10. At least one of my parents regularly kept track of my school progress.	1	0
11. At least one of my parents had punishments that were unpredictable.	1	0
12. I often wondered whether or not one of my parents would come home at the end of the day.	1	0
13. There were often people coming and going in my house that I did not expect to be there.	1	0
14. At least one parent made time each day to see how I was doing.	1	0
15. My family planned activities to do together.	1	0
16. At least one of my parents would plan something for the family, but then not follow through with the plan.	1	0
17. My family had holiday traditions that we did every year (e.g., cooking a special food at a particular time of year/decorate the house the same way).	1	0
18. There was a long period of time when I didn't see one of my parents (e.g. military deployment, jail time, custody arrangements).	1	0
19. I experienced changes in my custody arrangement.	1	0
20. I moved frequently.	1	0
21. At least one of my parents changed jobs frequently.	1	0
22. There were times when one of my parents was unemployed and couldn't find a job even though he/she wanted one.	1	0
23. There was a period of time when I often worried that I was not going to have enough food to eat.	1	0
24. There was a period of time when I often worried that my family would not have enough money to pay for necessities like clothing or bills.	1	0
25. There was a period of time when I did not feel safe in my home.	1	0
26. I changed schools frequently.	1	0

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Appendix B (cont.)

Oct 2018

Typical or average experiences from <u>earliest memory to age 18...</u>	Yes	No
27. I changed schools mid-year.	1	0
28. My parents had a stable relationship with each other.	1	0
29. My parents got divorced.	1	0
30. At least one of my parents had many romantic partners.	1	0

For the next set of questions, we are asking if this is true for at least one of your parents. Please answer these questions based on your typical or average experiences.

Typical or average experiences from <u>earliest memory to age 18...</u>	Yes	No
31. At least one of my parents was disorganized.	1	0
32. At least one of my parents was unpredictable.	1	0
33. For at least one of my parents, when they were upset I did not know how they would act.	1	0
34. One of my parents could go from calm to furious in an instant.	1	0
35. One of my parents could go from calm to stressed or nervous in an instant.	1	0

For the next set of questions, we are asking about your household. If you lived in more than one household, please answer about the household in which you spent the most time. Please answer these questions based on your typical or average experiences.

Typical or average experiences from <u>earliest memory to age 18...</u>	Yes	No
36. I lived in a clean house.	1	0
37. I lived in a cluttered house (e.g., piles of stuff everywhere).	1	0
38. In my house things I needed were often misplaced so that I could not find them.	1	0

Appendix C

Perceived Social Support from Friends

Perceived Social Support – Friend Scale (PSS-Fr)

The statements which follow refer to feelings and experiences which occur to most people at one time or another in their relationship with *friends*. For each statement there are three possible answers: Yes, No, Don't know. Please circle the answer you choose for each item.

- | | | | |
|-----|----|------------|--|
| Yes | No | Don't know | 1. My friends give me the moral support I need. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 2. Most other people are closer to their friends than I am. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 3. My friends enjoy hearing about what I think. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 4. When I confide in the friends who are closest to me, I get the idea that it makes them uncomfortable. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 5. I rely on my friends for emotional support. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 6. If I felt that one or more of my friends were upset with me, I'd just keep it to myself. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 7. I feel that I'm on the fringe in my circle of friends. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 8. There is a friend I could go to if I were just feeling down, without feeling funny about it later. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 9. My friends and I are very open about what we think about things. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 10. My friends are sensitive to my personal needs. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 11. My friends come to me for emotional support. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 12. My friends are good at helping me solve problems. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 13. I have a deep sharing relationship with a number of friends. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 14. My friends get good ideas about how to do things or make things from me. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 15. When I confide in friends, it makes me feel uncomfortable. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 16. My friends seek me out for companionship. |

Appendix C (cont.)

Yes	No	Don't know	17. I think that my friends feel that I'm good at helping them solve problems.
Yes	No	Don't know	18. I don't have a relationship with a friend that is as intimate as other people's relationships with friends.
Yes	No	Don't know	19. I've recently gotten a good idea about how to do something from a friend.
Yes	No	Don't know	20. I wish my friends were much different.

Appendix D

Perceived Social Support from Family

Perceived Social Support – Family Scale (PSS-Fa)

The statements which follow refer to feelings and experiences which occur to most people at one time or another in their relationship with their families. For each statement there are three possible answers: Yes, No, Don't know. Please circle the answer you choose for each item.

- | | | | |
|-----|----|------------|--|
| Yes | No | Don't know | 1. My family gives me the moral support I need. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 2. I get good ideas about how to do things or make things from my family. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 3. Most other people are closer to their family than I am. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 4. When I confide in the member of my family who are closest to me, I get the idea that it makes them uncomfortable. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 5. My family enjoy hearing about what I think |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 6. Members of my family share many of my interests. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 7. Certain members of my family come to me when they have problems or need advice. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 8. I rely on my family for emotional support. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 9. There is a member of my family I could go to if I were just feeling down, without feeling funny about it later. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 10. My family and I are very open about what we think about things. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 11. My family is sensitive to my personal needs. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 12. Members of my family come to me for emotional support. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 13. Member of my family are good at helping me solve problems. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 14. I have a deep sharing relationship with a number of members of my family. |
| Yes | No | Don't know | 15. Members of my family get good ideas about how to do things or make things from me. |

Appendix D (cont.)

Yes	No	Don't know	16. When I confide in members of my family, it makes me feel uncomfortable.
Yes	No	Don't know	17. Members of my family seek me out for companionship.
Yes	No	Don't know	18. I think that members of my family feel that I'm good at helping them solve problems.
Yes	No	Don't know	19. I don't have a relationship with a member of my family that is as intimate as other people's relationships with family members.
Yes	No	Don't know	20. I wish my family were much different.

Appendix E

Social Support Rating Scale (Perceived Social Support from Community)

SSRS
1. How many close friends from whom can you get support and help? A none B 1-2 C 3-5 d 6 or more
2. In the past year, you have: (1) Stay away from family and live in a single room. (2) Accommodation is constantly changing and most of the time with strangers. (3) Live with classmates, colleagues or friends. (4) Live with your family.
3. You and your neighbors: (1) They never care about each other, they are just nodding friends. (2) May be a little concerned about difficulties. (3) Some neighbors are very concerned about you. (4) Most of the neighbors care about you.
4. You and colleagues: (1) They never care about each other, they are just nodding friends. (2) May be a little concerned about difficulties. (3) Some colleagues are very concerned about you. (4) Most colleagues care about you.
5. Support and care from family members
1. Husband and wife (lover) A. there is no general support
2. Parents A. there is no general support
3. Children A. there is no general support
4. Brothers and sisters A. there is no general support
5. Other members A. there is no general support
6. In the past, when you were in a difficult situation, the sources of financial support and help to solve practical problems were as follows: (1) No source.

Appendix E (cont.)

support and help to solve practical problems were as follows:

(1) No source.

(2) The following sources: (optional)

A. Spouse; B. other family members; C. relatives; D. friends; e. colleagues; F. work unit; g. official or semi official organizations such as the party, league and trade union; h. non official organizations such as religious and social groups; I. others (please list)

7. In the past, the sources of comfort and concern you received in case of emergency include:

(1) No source.

(2) The following sources (optional)

A. Spouse; B. other family members; C. friends; D. relatives; e. colleagues; F. work unit; g. official or semi official organizations such as the party, league and trade union; h. non official organizations such as religious and social groups; I. others (please list)

8. The way to talk when you are in trouble:

(1) Never tell anyone

(2) Only to 1-2 people who are very close to each other.

(3) If a friend asks, you will say so.

(4) Take the initiative to tell your troubles to get support and understanding.

9. How to ask for help when you are in trouble:

(1) Rely on yourself and don't accept help from others.

(2) Rarely ask for help.

(3) Sometimes ask for help.

(4) In case of difficulties, they often ask for help from family members, relatives and organizations.

10. For activities organized by organizations (such as party and League organizations, religious organizations, trade unions, student unions, etc.), you:

(1) Never attend

(2) Occasionally

(3) Regular attendance

(4) Active participation and active activities.