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Seeking Support in Non-kin Informal Relationships: An IPA Study of University Students' Experiences

Jiabei Hao

Department of Psychology and Human Development, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK
ivvvy0226@126.com

Abstract. University students often turn to close others within their social networks for support when experiencing emotional difficulties, but less is known about how a particular supporter is selected and how supportive interactions develop. This study explored how university students seek and experience non-kin informal support for self-identified emotional difficulties. Twelve University College London students aged 21–25 completed semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, and three Group Experiential Themes were identified. First, participants drew on accumulated knowledge of particular relationships and considered who was likely to understand the specific difficulty when deciding whom to approach, while immediate accessibility sometimes prompted supporter involvement before a deliberate selection had been made. Second, identifying a suitable supporter did not remove participants' hesitation about disclosure. Concerns about burdening others, indebtedness, or judgement influenced whether and how much they shared. Previous interactions could make disclosure feel less uncertain, while in some cases the supporter created an opening by noticing or asking about the participant's difficulty. Third, responses felt especially supportive usually involved experiences of being witnessed, having emotions validated, and perceiving genuine care, and the perceived meaning of a response sometimes mattered beyond its practical content. The overall findings suggest that non-kin informal support develops through relationship-specific processes across supporter selection, disclosure, and the interpretation of subsequent interactions.

Keywords: social support, informal support, non-kin relationships, university students, interpretative phenomenological analysis

1. Introduction

Emotional difficulties are common among university students, in the context of academic, financial, and social pressures. Based on 62 meta-analyses including more than 8.7 million students, the prevalence of mild depressive and anxiety symptoms was estimated at 35.4% and 40.2%, respectively [1]. Such difficulties are not limited to students with diagnosed mental health disorders but are also common across the wider student population and are associated with poorer wellbeing and academic outcomes [2].

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Students appear to rely heavily on people already present in their personal networks. McCabe et al. [3] found substantially stronger intentions to seek help from close others than from university or external professional services. A similar pattern appears in studies of actual behaviours, which reported that roommates, friends, and significant others (60.5%) were the most commonly used sources of support among final-year undergraduates, followed by family (43.8%), while considerably fewer students had sought support from a mental health clinician (26.1%) [4].

Naturally occurring non-kin relationships, such as friendships, peer relationships, and unmarried romantic relationships, provide a distinct context for support. Their role differs from both formal services and kin relationships, but less is known about how support develops within these relationships across supporter selection, disclosure, and subsequent interaction.

The present study examines experiences of seeking and engaging with non-kin informal support for self-identified emotional difficulties among university students without a formal diagnosis. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), it focuses on how particular relationships become sources of support, how participants decide whether and how to disclose their difficulties, and how subsequent interactions are experienced as supportive.

2. Literature review

Social support has commonly been conceptualised as an interpersonal resource associated with psychological adjustment and wellbeing [5]. An important distinction concerns support that is received and support that individuals perceive to be available or supportive. Synthesising 60 meta-analyses, Zell and Stockus [6] found that perceived support was more strongly associated with psychological adjustment than received support (r = .26 vs. r = .16). This shifts attention from supportive behaviour alone towards how support is experienced within particular relationships. Relational Regulation Theory (RRT) similarly treats perceived support as partly relationship-specific, proposing that psychological states are regulated through ordinary but affectively consequential interactions with particular social partners [7], suggesting that the same interaction can carry different supportive meaning across relationships.

Pescosolido [8] challenged models centred on individual choice by locating help-seeking within social networks and ongoing social interaction. People may distinguish among network members when deciding whom to approach [9], but this selection is not always fully deliberative. Immediate accessibility can affect who becomes involved, and support-seeking may sometimes develop before the person has consciously settled on seeking help [10]. Evidence shows that supporter selection reflects both prior judgement and what happens in the moment.

Identifying a suitable supporter does not guarantee disclosure. The less clearly defined obligations of non-kin relationships can create uncertainty about what can reasonably be asked from another person, and explicit help-seeking may carry anticipated costs for the other person [11]. Furthermore, disclosure is not a single decision. The Disclosure Decision Model (DDM) distinguishes the decision to disclose from subsequent choices about what is revealed, and how deeply and broadly it is discussed [12], emphasising that supporter selection and disclosure are related but separate decisions.

Support-seeking does not end once disclosure begins. Rains and Carter [13] describe supportive communication as a process co-constructed through conversation, as support seekers' messages affect the provider's response, and that response can shape further disclosure. The meaning of the responses is partly interpretive. Perceived partner responsiveness concerns whether another person is experienced as understanding, validating, and caring towards personally meaningful aspects of the self [14]. The interpersonal process model of intimacy similarly proposes that the relational meaning

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of a response depends partly on how the discloser understands it [15]. A response that appears supportive in form may not be experienced as supportive in the same way across relationships.

Literatures collectively address different parts of informal support, but less is known about how these processes connect across a whole support episode. The evidence base among university students is also limited. Vicary et al. [16] identified only ten relevant studies on social support among students with self-reported or diagnosed mental health problems from 21,537 initially identified records. Quantitative measures of support availability, help-seeking intentions, or received support can identify broader patterns and associations but capture the relationship-specific development of support less directly. Related qualitative work also suggests that relationships should not be treated as interchangeable sources of support. For example, Bilello et al. [17] found that friendships occupied different supportive roles and could be shaped by difficult experiences, despite the study's concern of a distinct clinical context. The present study examines non-kin informal support across the interactions, focusing on how particular relationships become sources of support, what shapes disclosure within them, and how subsequent interactions come to be experienced as supportive.

3. Methodology

3.1. Methodological approach

This qualitative study adopted a constructivist epistemology and used IPA to examine how participants made sense of support within particular relationships [18, 19]. Its interpretative and idiographic orientation allowed individual accounts to be examined before patterns across cases were considered. A reflexive journal was kept throughout data collection and analysis to document methodological decisions, possible researcher influences, and developing interpretations.

3.2. Participants and recruitment

Twelve UCL students aged 21–25 (M = 23.25; 10 women, 2 men) were purposively recruited through the university participant forum. 9 identified as Chinese, 11 were postgraduate students, and 9 studied psychology-related subjects. All the participants confirmed informed consent, identifying information was removed from transcripts, and support resources were provided given the sensitivity of the topic. Ethical approval was granted by the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee. Eligibility relied on self-identification: participants had experienced emotional difficulties affecting everyday functioning within the previous 12 months and sought support from non-kin informal ties. Those with a formal mental health diagnosis or currently receiving treatment were excluded. The sample allowed detailed idiographic analysis alongside cautious cross-case comparison [19, 20].

Some participants described university experiences partly outside the planned 12-month period. These accounts were retained after reflexive consideration, because participants could still provide detailed accounts of the experiences. Two accounts in which support was initiated by the other person were also retained, as participants still made decisions about what to disclose and how to engage with the support offered.

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3.3. Data collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 40 minutes. Interviews explored participants' emotional difficulties, support relationships, how interactions developed, and reflections on the support received. Accounts focused on a particular non-kin supporter during a period of emotional difficulty and could concern either a discrete interaction or repeated conversations across that period.

Interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin according to participant preference and transcribed in the original language. All transcripts were coded in English. Mandarin extracts used in cross-case analysis or reporting were subsequently translated into English by the bilingual researcher [21].

3.4. Data analysis

Analysis followed Smith et al.'s IPA procedure [19]. Each transcript was read repeatedly and annotated at descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual levels. Experiential statements were developed and clustered into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), with each case analysed in full before cross-case comparison generated Group Experiential Themes (GETs). Analysis examined both shared patterns and differences across participants and was not guided by a predetermined theoretical coding framework.

4. Results

The analysis generated three GETs concerning how particular relationships became involved in support, how decisions about disclosure developed, and how subsequent interactions came to be experienced as supportive. Together, these themes captured overlapping aspects of participants' experiences and showed how non-kin support-seeking unfolds as a relationally situated process.

4.1. Theme 1: Choosing whom to approach

4.1.1. Relational fit

Many participants already knew whom they wanted to approach before disclosure began. Trust and sense of safety were built through long-term intimacy, and knowledge accumulated through familiarity reduced the need to explain contextual information, giving participants a basis for anticipating how different people might respond. These expectations varied across both relationships and difficulties, so even among close others, some people were seen as better suited to particular situations than others, showing that potential supporters may not be interchangeable.

4.1.2. Situational fit

Supporter suitability also depended on the nature of the difficulty and how well another person was expected to understand it. In some situations, shared circumstances, such as both being university students, made communication easier because the other person already understood part of the context. This was especially helpful when participants were emotionally exhausted and had little capacity to explain their situation in detail. However, a similar social position was not always sufficient for understanding. In some cases, participants required someone who had experienced "similar pain" and whom they expected to empathise more closely with their difficulties.

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4.1.3. Immediate opportunity

Supporter selection was not always preceded by an evaluation of relational or situational fit. In moments of more immediate distress, physical accessibility could temporarily outweigh relational closeness in determining who provided support. Everyday interactions, such as preparing food together, could create opportunities for spontaneous disclosure without a prior decision about whom to approach. In these circumstances, support-seeking emerged through immediate interaction rather than deliberate supporter selection.

4.2. Theme 2: relational boundaries of disclosure

4.2.1. Whether to disclose

Identifying a suitable supporter did not necessarily resolve whether participants felt able to bring their distress into the relationship. Many participants hesitated despite wanting support, weighing possible costs to others, particularly emotional burden, against possible costs to themselves, including indebtedness, judgement, or being judged differently. For some, these concerns led to prolonged hesitation before disclosure, often until they felt unable to cope with those emotions on their own. Others gave relatively little further thought to whether they could disclose because previous interactions had already established that this kind of difficulty could be brought into the relationship.

The opening for disclosure was not always created by the participants. For those who strongly resisted troubling others, another person's noticing or asking could create an opportunity to disclose that they might not otherwise have initiated. In these cases, supporter involvement prompted a completed decision to seek support and reduced the need for participants to initiate the interaction themselves.

4.2.2. How much to disclose

After the support was mobilised, participants had to decide how much of their distress to share. For most participants, the strongest restraint occurred before speaking. Once disclosure had begun, they described relatively little further withholding.

This pattern was not universal. A small minority continued to regulate the depth of disclosure after support had been mobilised because of concerns about placing too much emotional pressure. These participants restricted what they shared, keeping conversations closer to practical circumstances than their fuller emotional experience. Thus, concerns about disclosure could either diminish after speaking began or continue to shape the extent of what was shared.

4.3. Theme 3: Support through the felt sense of connection

4.3.1. Being witnessed

A few participants described relief from simply knowing that another person was aware of their internal experience. "Being witnessed" could extend beyond a single interaction, creating a sense of no longer carrying the difficulty alone.

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4.3.2. Being validated

For many participants, knowing that another person was aware of the experience could not provide enough support. They described feeling supported when another person recognised their emotional response as making sense, even if the situation itself did not improve. Conversely, responses that dismissed or denied these emotions could make participants feel that their reactions were not legitimate and make their feelings even worse.

4.3.3. Being cared for

Furthermore, some participants experienced support when they perceived a sense of care behind the supporters' responses and actions. Small gestures, such as bringing a dessert on an ordinary day after knowing the participant's distress, could become meaningful, because they made care visible, in spite of the limited practical value.

Notably, an imperfect response could sometimes remain supportive when participants believed the concern behind it was genuine. For instance, one participant still experienced a reply that "didn't really hit the mark" as supportive because the friend's concern felt genuine. In contrast, responses that sounded appropriate were not always experienced as equally supportive when the understanding behind them seemed to be templated and less genuine. This was especially clear in one participant's comparison with counselling: "It's not something completely genuine; it's something trained into them. But my friend is definitely 100% genuine."

Across these accounts, supportiveness depended not only on response content but also on participants' perception of being seen, recognised, and cared for within that relationship.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that non-kin informal support was shaped by participants' understandings of particular relationships across supporter selection, disclosure, and the interpretation of responses. These aspects were distinguishable, operated flexibly and were shaped by both the supporter and the support seeker. Support could emerge through deliberate choices, immediate circumstances, and interactions partly initiated by the other person.

5.1. Selecting supporters through fit and opportunity

Participants drew on knowledge accumulated through particular relationships to anticipate who would be suitable to approach. This is consistent with evidence that people discriminate among network members when selecting support [9]. The present findings further suggest that previous interactions informed expectations about how well a person would understand the participant and how they were likely to respond. Suitability also varied with the particular difficulty. This extends Cutrona and Russell's [22] matching logic by suggesting that matching may concern not only the type of support needed but also which person is expected to fit those needs. However, a completed evaluation was not always necessary. Immediate availability could bring someone into the interaction before deliberate selection, consistent with Small and Sukhu's [10] characterisation of network mobilisation as sometimes incidental or spontaneous.

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5.2. Relational boundaries of disclosure

Identifying a suitable supporter did not necessarily resolve whether distress could be brought into that relationship. Concerns about burden, emotional labour, indebtedness, and judgement were consistent with evidence that anticipated interpersonal costs can inhibit explicit support-seeking [11], while uncertainty about what could reasonably be asked of another person reflected the less prescribed obligations of non-kin relationships [23]. Perceived suitability and the appropriateness of disclosure appeared to be related but distinct judgements.

Findings distinguished deciding whether to disclose from regulating how much to disclose. For many participants, the strongest restraint occurred before disclosure, with relatively little further withholding once interaction had begun and only a small minority continued to restrict disclosure because of concerns about burdening others. Omarzu's [12] DDM similarly distinguishes the initial decision to disclose from subsequent regulation of disclosure, while the present findings suggest that these decisions may carry unequal experiential difficulty.

In a small number of cases, another person noticed that something was wrong and created an opening that the participant was unlikely to initiate independently. This supports Rains and Carter's [13] view of support-seeking as co-constructed and adds that supporter initiation could reduce some uncertainty around beginning disclosure by signalling willingness to engage, suggesting that disclosure remained a dynamic process and was partly shaped by both sides of support.

5.3. Experiencing support through relational meaning

Response content alone did not determine whether support was experienced as supportive. Participants' experiences showed clear convergence with the concept of PPR [14]. Validation was particularly important when participants wanted their emotional responses to be recognised as understandable or legitimate, while care depended partly on what another person's attention or actions were understood to signify.

"Being witnessed" was less completely captured by responsiveness. Few participants described value in another person simply knowing about their experience, either through hearing the disclosure or seeing their struggle over time. Research on social sharing of emotion similarly suggests that communicating emotional experiences can have interpersonal significance beyond immediate emotional relief [24]. This study suggests that relational value may sometimes arise from having one's experience known before considering the quality of a specific supportive response.

Response content and experienced supportiveness could also diverge. Imperfect responses could remain supportive when interpreted as expressions of genuine concern, while appropriate-sounding responses could feel less supportive when experienced as less genuine, highlighting that supportiveness depended partly on what responses were understood to signify within the relationship.

6. Conclusion

Using IPA, this study examined how university students experienced seeking and engaging with non-kin informal support for self-identified emotional difficulties. Across three themes, particular relationships shaped support at multiple points without producing a fixed pathway. Relational knowledge informed who appeared suitable, relational boundaries shaped whether and how distress entered the relationship, and relational interpretation shaped whether responses became supportive.

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Several limitations qualify these interpretations. First, single retrospective interviews required participants to reconstruct interactions after they had occurred and may have made fragmented or developing processes appear more coherent than they were at the time. Second, non-kin relationships were treated as a broad category despite variation between long-established friendships, roommates, and romantic partners. The study thus cannot establish whether the processes identified differ systematically across relationship types. Finally, most participants were enrolled in psychology-related subjects. Familiarity with psychological concepts may have influenced how some participants noticed and articulated emotional and supportive processes, limiting the transferability of these interpretations to more disciplinary diverse student populations.

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