Stress Appraisal and Social Support of Chinese Mothers of Adult Children With Mental Retardation

Theresa Yuk-ki Chen
Heep Hong Society for Handicapped Children (Hong Kong)

Catherine So-kum Tang
Chinese University of Hong Kong

Thirty Chinese mothers of adult children with moderate to severe mental retardation were interviewed to explore the source and nature of their stress and social support. Results revealed child-related and parent-related stress specific to these mothers. The most common stressors were future planning and behavior problems of the target offspring. Mothers received tangible, emotional, and informational support mainly from family members and training center staff. Some evidence was also found for the optimal-matching model of stress appraisal and social support. Regardless of the duration of stress, all forms of support were perceived as equally useful for uncontrollable stress, whereas tangible support was regarded as more useful than informational support for controllable stress.

Research in Western countries has consistently shown that parents of children with mental retardation experience high levels of emotional, financial, and physical stress (Byrne & Cunningham, 1985; Singhi, Goyal, Pershad, Singhi, & Walia, 1990). The presence of social support is related to parents’ adaptation to stress (Krauss, 1993; Stoneman & Crapps, 1988), physical and psychological well-being (Dunst & Trivette, 1985; Heller & Factor, 1993), and positive attitudes toward future planning for children with mental retardation (Grant, 1990). Cross-cultural studies on families of children with mental retardation also show similar findings among non-English speaking families from Central American (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993) and Asian countries, such as Japan (Mink, 1990), Sri Lanka (Nikapota, 1986), and Bangladesh (Zaman, Banu, Habib, & Munir, 1986).

Recently, increasing attention has been directed toward the mechanism underlying the effects of social support on stress and well-being. Cutrona and Russell (1990) proposed the optimal-matching model, suggesting that the effectiveness of social support depends on the match between the specific need identified after the primary appraisal of a stress and the type of support provided. The appraisal process for a particular event involves the judgment of the desirability (whether the event represents a threat or challenge to the person), controllability (whether the person has the ability to control the event or its consequences), and duration of the event and its consequences. Results from indirect tests of the model indicate that