

# Cultural Background, Social Support and Mental Health of College Students

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to examine perceived social supports, self-esteem and perceived stigma by different cultural groups of student and its consequences to their mental health. Methods: Students with German, Indonesian and Turkish backgrounds studying in Berlin were invited to participate in the study. The students were requested to complete four instruments: General health questionnaire, Rosenberg self-esteem scale, social strain (F-Sozu), and devaluation discrimination scale in their own languages. Correlation analysis, independent sample t-test and analysis of variance were used according to the type of data. Results: Cultural background was associated significantly with psychological distress, personal self-esteem, perceived social support and devaluation discrimination towards mental illness. Student from Indonesia had a lower self-esteem and lower perceived social support but also had a less psychological distress and fewer stigmas towards people with mental disorder. Conclusion: Cultural background of students has a significant impact to their psychological distress, self-esteem, perceived social support and stigma towards mental disorder. The Indonesian student studying in Berlin should improve their self-esteem and social supports.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social support is increasingly believed as a noteworthy determinant of a person mental health (Leach 2014; Hendryx et al. 2009; Davis & Brekke 2014). Social support correlates positively with self-esteem or optimism (Symister & Friend 2003; Kong et al. 2014; Karademas 2006), but negatively with psychological distress (Bíró et al. 2011; Chao 2012; Luo & Wang 2009; Horton & Wallander 2001) and stigma toward mental illness (Denenny et al. 2015). Those with low quality of social support were likely to experience mental problem compared to those with a better social support (Hefner & Eisenberg 2009). The perceived social support was also different between gender (Vaux 1985; Landman-Peeters et al. 2005; Matud et al. 2003), age and ethnicity (Vaux 1985). Previous studies suggest that social supports could improve cognitive functioning, self efficacy, confidence and reduces emotional conflict, distress and depression (DiMatteo 2004). Furthermore, the prevalence mental problems is high

among college students (Hunt & Eisenberg 2010), thus having good social supports is essential.

International students are at a greater risk of suffering from such a mental problem compared to the students in general (Mori 2000). Cultural issues, language barriers, social connectedness and lack of social support can all leads to an acculturation stress (Yeh & Inose 2003; Poyrazli et al. 2004). The students' acculturative stress is associated with feeling of loneliness, homesickness, anxiety and depression (Yue et al. 2013). Unfortunately, despite the mental problems, the students tend to delay treatment seeking (Hunt & Eisenberg 2010; Eisenberg et al. 2007).

A number of studies have investigated the role of social supports and other health determinants towards the mental health condition of the international students (Allgöwer et al. 2001; Taylor et al. 2004; Constantine et al. 2004; Misra & Castillo 2004; Yeh & Inose 2003; Yeh & Inose 2002; Bovier et al. 2004; Crockett et al. 2007; Torres & Solberg 2001). Nevertheless, study that involves Indonesian students studying abroad is scarce and therefore their mental health status is rather unknown. This survey

aimed to unveil the minor psychological distress, self-esteem, perceived social support and stigma towards mental illness and to compare the differences between the students of Indonesian, German and Turkish backgrounds in Berlin.

## 2 METHODS

This cross sectional study was conducted in the area of Berlin.

### 2.1 Participants

A total of 149 students from three different backgrounds (German, Indonesia and Turkish) studying in any university in Berlin - Brandenburg were included. They were recruited in various places, but mostly in campus settings. There was no specific inclusion and exclusion criteria for prospective respondents, but the Indonesian student group should at least had been living around six months in Germany. All respondents were requested to complete self-rating questionnaires for minor psychological distress, self esteem, perceived stigma and social supports.

### 2.2 Settings

Data was collected from July 2012 to February 2013 in the area of Berlin. The ethics committee of Charité University, Berlin, approved the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### 2.3 Measures

#### 2.3.1 Socio Demographic Variables

The first part of questionnaires consists of socio-demographic information; age, gender, cultural background, marital status, living with and source of income.

#### 2.3.2 Translation of Survey Instruments

The language of questionnaires was provided in German and Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language). The German and Turkish background students filled the questionnaire in German, while the Indonesian student did it in Bahasa Indonesia. Several instruments in German were already existed from a previous study (Bromand et al. 2012). Translation of the instruments from German to

Bahasa Indonesia used the standard procedure “forwards-backward”: German to Bahasa Indonesia, and then translated back to German. A native speaker and a Bahasa Indonesia expert proved the final version of instruments Bahasa Indonesia.

#### 2.3.3 General Health Questionnaire (GHQ 12)

The general health questionnaire was used to measure the minor psychological distress. Since its development in 1970s (Goldberg & Blackwell 1970), the GHQ has been used in many studies. The 12 items of GHQ also has been translated and validated various languages and used in various settings (Montazeri et al. 2003; Quek et al. 2001; Sánchez-López & Dresch 2008). Each item of GHQ 12 was scored from 0 to 3, which makes the overall possible score ranged from 0 to 36. Higher score refers to the higher psychological distress. Reliability of the present study was 0.89 in German and 0.82 among Indonesian.

#### 2.3.4 Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSE 10)

Self-esteem of the student in the current study was measured with the Rosenberg self-esteem scale. The questionnaire has been validated in various languages and used in several previous studies (Piyavhatkul et al. 2011; Martín-Albo et al. 2007; Schmitt & Allik 2005). The current study uses items scoring from 0 to 3, which makes a possible summed score from 0 to 30. The higher score refers to the higher self-esteem. Reliability of the present study was 0.87 in German and Turkish and 0.83 in Bahasa Indonesian.

#### 2.3.5 Social Support (F-SOZU)

The German social support questionnaire was used to identify the perceived social support among the students. The instrument consists of 22 items of expression such as “I know someone to whom I can ask for help whenever I need” (Q5) in a positive form or “I often feel like an outsider”(Q12) in a negative form. The items are rated in Likert scale from 5 (Totally Agree) to 1 (totally disagree). The possible summed score was between 22 and 110. The higher score refers to the higher perceived social supports. Reliability of the current study was 0.89 among Turkish, and 0.75 among German and Indonesian students.

### 2.3.6 Devaluation Discrimination (D-D 12)

The *perceived public stigma* was measured using a 12 items of devaluation discrimination questionnaire. The instrument was developed by Link and colleagues, and has been used in several previous studies (Link 1987; Link et al. 1989; Eisenberg et al. 2009). The current study uses the scoring of 1 to 4 of each item, which makes a possible summed score of 12 to 48. The higher score defines the higher perceived devaluation and discrimination towards people with mental disorders. Additionally, two extra questions were asked to Indonesian group concerning their perception on mental health treatment in Germany, and the support they received from the fellow Indonesians in Berlin

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Demographic variables were investigated by descriptive analyses. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov was used to inspect the distribution of the data. Correlations between numerical variables were tested using the Pearson correlation coefficient test in items that were normally distributed, or using the Spearman test when data was not normally

distributed. The independent sample t-test or the Mann Whitney test was used where appropriate. The association between more than two background variables (cultural backgrounds, living partner and sources of income) and the score of the scales (psychological distress, self-esteem, social support, and devaluation discrimination) was tested using the one-way ANOVA, with Tukey post hoc correction. Data was analyzed using the STATA 13 software.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Respondents Characteristics

The sample consists of 48 (32.2%) of each German and Indonesian and 53 (35%) of Turkish background university students. Mean age was  $24 \pm 4.4$  years and 87 (58.4%) were female. The vast majority was single (91.3%) and only 11 (7.4%) were married. Some 61 (40.9%) of them obtained money from parent, while other obtained it from working ( $n = 48$ , 32.2%), government loan ( $n = 28$ , 18.8%), and from scholarship ( $n = 10$ , 6.7%) (Table.1).

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristic of the Respondents

Characteristics	Number	% or SD
Mean of age (yrs)	24	4.4
Female gender	87	58.4
Background		
German	48	32.2
Indonesian	48	32.2
Turkish	53	35.6
Marital Status		
Single	136	91.3
Married	11	7.4
Divorce	1	0.7
Living with		
Alone	29	19.5
With Partner or friend	44	29.5
With Family	44	29.5
In Student-Wohnheim	30	20.1
Source of Income		
Working	48	32.2
Scholarship	10	6.7
Government loan	28	18.8
Parent	61	40.9
Others	2	1.3

### 3.2 Psychological Distress

There was sufficient evidence of association between student's psychological distress and gender ( $U = 1.95$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) cultural background ( $F(2, 143) = 12.86$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), living partner ( $F(3, 140) = 5.78$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), but not with marital status and source of income ( $p > 0.05$ ). Psychological distress was also correlated with age ( $r = 0.19$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Older age and female gender suffered psychological distress more than the younger age and male students. When the cultural backgrounds were compared, the Indonesian students had the lowest mean of distress score compared to German and Turkish students. Students living with family also had the highest distress, followed by living alone, living in *student-wohnheim* and living with partner.

#### 3.2.1 Self Esteem

Self-esteem was significantly different between cultural background groups ( $F(2, 141) = 18.04$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). The Indonesian student had the lowest mean of self esteem score compared to German and Turkish students (mean = 19.09 vs. 23.55 vs. 23.38). Older age was also related to self-esteem ( $r = 0.21$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), where those with older age had a higher self-esteem compared to the younger. Lastly, there was insufficient evidence of association between self-esteem and any other demographic variables ( $p \geq 0.05$ ).

#### 3.2.2 Social Support

The student's perceived social support was associated with gender ( $U = 157$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), cultural background ( $F(2, 135) = 34.48$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), living partner ( $F(3, 132) = 5.3$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) and source of income ( $F(4, 133) = 3.65$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ). Female students reported better social support compared to the male (Mean Rank = 79.02 vs. 55.96). Indonesian students also reported the least social support, while the German and Turkish did not significantly different. Student living with family also reported the highest social support, while those who live in a student *wohnheim* reported the least. On the other hand, student who received money from parent reported the least social support, while those who obtained a government loan reported the best social support. Nevertheless, post hoc analysis in a Tukey Homogeneous Subsets table suggests that the entire variable shared the same column, which also means that no significant different between the sources of income towards perceived social support. Furthermore, perceived social support was also

positively correlated with age ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ), where older age students tend to perceived better social support than younger students.

#### 3.2.3 Devaluation Discrimination

Devaluation and discrimination was significantly associated with the cultural background ( $F(2, 140) = 5.56$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ) and not with any other demographic variables ( $p \geq 0.05$ ). Indonesian students have the least stigma and discrimination towards mental illness and the people with mental disorders, followed by German and Turkish Students (mean = 42.89 vs. 44.94 vs. 47.29). Post hoc analysis in Tukey Homogeneous subsets table shows that the German and Indonesian groups share the same column. At the same time, the German group also shares the same column with Turkish group, which suggest that the most significant difference was found between Indonesian and Turkish students.

Additionally, around two-third (74.5%) of Indonesian student reported that the community treats the person with mental problem differently compared to the condition in Germany. Also, almost all Indonesian students (93.2%) believed that mental treatment was far better in Germany compared to the services in Indonesia.

#### 3.2.4 Social Support and Psychological Distress

The perceived social support did not associate with the psychological distress, and neither with self-esteem and devaluation discrimination ( $p \geq 0.05$ ).

## 4 DISCUSSION

The current study highlights several important findings: (a) cultural background of the college students was associated significantly with psychological distress, personal self-esteem, perceived social support and devaluation discrimination towards mental illness; (b) the Indonesian students in Berlin had a lower self-esteem and lower perceived social support but also had a less psychological distress and fewer stigmas towards people with mental disorder compared to the German student and students with Turkish background; and (c) the score of measured instruments was not significantly difference between German and Turkish students, which also suggests that only Indonesian students had a different values of all variables.



Considering the Indonesian students as a group of migrants in Germany, the finding of low perceived social support and low self-esteem among them is fairly reasonable. As part of international students, they live in a new environment with no family or the important other, all of which could alter their sense of self and resulting in significant distress (Yeh & Inose 2003). On the other hand, the German and the Turkish background students have considered Berlin as their home, where many of them were born and raised. Most of the Turkish students in the current study were also born in Germany, which also explains why the difference of perceived social support, self-esteem and psychological distress between them is not obvious.

Furthermore, inconsistent with previous studies which suggest an association between the student's mental health and the social support (Bovier et al. 2004; Bíró et al. 2011; Hefner & Eisenberg 2009), the current study did not reveal any statistical association between the two variables. Nevertheless, the findings that social support associate with gender and age are consistent with previous reports (Cheng & Chan 2004; Matud et al. 2003). Larger network among older age students might also explain why they perceived better social support. Female is also reported to have a larger social network and thus reported better social support (Landman-Peeters et al. 2005). Living with family also means that family support is almost always available for both German and Turkish background students, a condition that is rarely happening among Indonesian students.

The nature of cross sectional design of the current study serves as a limitation, thus the causality between variables cannot be examined. Other limitation includes a small sample size and applying convenience-sampling methods. A larger sample size should be considered in the further studies. Using the convenience sampling method and longitudinal methods are also recommended. Further study should also consider the role of acculturation as a determinant of social support and mental problem among international students.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Cultural background of students has a significant impact to their psychological distress, self esteem, perceived social support and stigma towards mental disorder. The Indonesian student studying in Berlin should improve their self-esteem and social supports.

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