

What Kind of Consolation Do Students in Japan Who Have Seriously Failed Academically Really Want?

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The European Conference on Education 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Failure is inevitable for students. The serious failures for students in Japanese schools are failure to pass exams and late submission deadline. How students are comforted in such failures may affect their recovery and motivation for further study. Since friends, instead of teachers, are the significant others in adolescence, we examined the effectiveness of eight types of comforting strategies from friends (including empathy, advice, presentation of the friend's own failure, physical contact, and offer of assistance at the pace of the student, etc.). Participants were 153 female university students. Questionnaire. The results showed that in the two situations a more effective way of comforting was to include an offer of help, taking into consideration the pace of recovery at which the student was able to receive the comfort, rather than to include advice (Main effects of comforting strategies; Exam scene $F(7,2128) = 31.89, p < .01$, task scene $F(7,2128) = 16.81, p < .01$). Consolation with advice was difficult to accept, especially in the failed exam scene. Next, we analyzed the effect of the difference in psychological distance from friends on comforting. It was suggested that, depending on the difference in psychological distance from friends, there were some ways of comforting that were ineffective even when comforted by friends who were with them on a daily basis (Exam scene $F(1,151) = 18.48, p < .01$, Task scene $F(1,151) = 10.42, p < .01$). We will discuss different effective ways of consolation from friends that empower students who have experienced painful failures.

Keyword : Consolation, Academic Failure Situations, Psychological Distance, College Students, Friends

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Introduction

Failure is inevitable for students. The serious failures for students in Japanese schools are failure to pass exams and late submission deadline. Failure to pass exams or miss submission deadlines is a serious problem for students, especially in Japanese schools. How students are consoled for these academic failures may affect their recovery and subsequent motivation to learn. People offer comfort to others who are depressed or anxious in the face of negative events. Comfort is one of emotional support. It is defined as Verbal and nonverbal actions taken to reduce the discomfort and restore the psychological state of an individual when he or she is experiencing some difficulty(Ogawa,2014,p.279).

During adolescence, when adolescents are striving for psychological independence from their parents and friends become important others, consolation from friends in situations of academic failure is considered to be an important psychological support. There are many different types of consolation. Verbal consolation, such as accepting and encouraging the feelings of a person suffering from stress through words, and nonverbal consolation, such as tapping a person on the shoulder or shedding tears together with the person (Ogawa&Nakazawa,2014,p.61). Comfort has also been shown to relieve depression and increase the recipient's sense of security and happy mood (Bylsma, Vingerhoets, & Rottenberg, 2008), and may play a significant role in recovering from negative situations.

Consolation, however, does not always have a positive impact on the recipient. The reason for this is thought to lie in the motivation for consolation. Comfort is primarily motivated by the feeling of "pity," which is an emotion that directs sympathy and concern toward the other person by feeling "poor" or "sorry" for the other person's predicament. Therefore, it has also been shown that when the recipient of comfort feels that the other person is feeling sorry for him or her, he or she recognizes the difference between the other person's ability and position, which has a negative effect on self-esteem and increases depressive feelings (Blaine, Crocker, & Major, 1995). Thus, while comfort is expected to have a positive impact, it can also have a negative impact on the recipient. Therefore, a detailed examination of how to console a friend who has experienced academic failure is warranted.

However, the difficulty of this examination reveals that in contemporary friendships in Japan, even when a friend is depressed, there are cases in which the friend remains unable to do anything to comfort the friend, fearing that consolation will hurt the friend (Mitsuno & Miura, 2010). This suggests that there may be hesitation among friendships, such as not knowing what to say to a friend who is in a negative situation. In contrast, a study by Ogawa and Nakazawa (2014) showed that the percentage of respondents who answered "yes" was significantly higher than that of those who answered "no" to the question, "When you have a hard time and feel depressed, would you want a friend to comfort you? This suggests that the recipient of consolation in a negative situation wants to be consoled by a friend, but the consoler is too concerned about the negative effects of consolation to do anything about it, suggesting that there may be a difference between the recipient and the sender of consolation.

In a previous study on consolation, Ogawa (2011) examined the effect of closeness to the other person on the recipient of consolation, examining differences in the recipient's emotions when consoled during a stressful event, depending on the closeness of the consoler to the person being consoled. The results showed that consolation from a close friend led to higher feelings of pleasure (e.g., happiness, relief) and lower feelings of repulsion (anger and irritation toward the recipient) than consolation from a person one did not know well. This

previous study has shown that consolation from a close stranger is easier to accept than consolation from a less close stranger. It is also thought that the closeness of the consoling partner influences the acceptance of consolation. However, even close others differ in their psychological distance from that person. It is conceivable that even a close friend with whom one is often together on a daily basis may not be able to accept consolation from that friend if the psychological distance is not very close.

Based on the above, this study focuses on the recipients of consolation among college students to examine (1) what kind of consolation they can accept in academic failure situations, and (2) the relationship between psychological distance from friends and the acceptance of consolation. Regarding consoling behavior, which has also been suggested to have a negative impact on the recipients of consolation, we believe that examining and clarifying consolations that are easily accepted by the recipients of consolation will be one way to support the development of good interpersonal relationships in daily life.

Method of investigation

The survey methodology, divided into preliminary and main investigation, is described below.

Preliminary investigation

Thirty-eight university students (6 males and 32 females, mean age 19.79) were included in the analysis.

In order to investigate what kind of serious negative situations are for college students and to establish the negative situations in this study, Takabira's (1998) Life Event Scale by Interpersonal and Achievement Domain was used to conduct the survey. For each of the 19 scenes in the achievement domain in the negative items of the life event scale by interpersonal and achievement domain, a rating of the negative severity of each scene was obtained using a 10-point scale (1 = "Not a negative event at all" to 10 = "A very negative event").

The mean and standard deviation of the negative severity of the 19 scenes were then calculated (Table 1). Based on the results, the following two situations were selected as academic failure situations that had the highest negative severity for the students.

A1. Assignments were not completed by the due date" (average 8.18) and "A2. Failure in anything related to the examination" (average 7.89).

Negative life events (achievement area)	Average	Standard deviation
1. I did not complete assignments (e.g., reports) by the due date.	8.18	1.96
2. I experienced frustration with things related to my entrance examinations.	7.89	2.13
3. I had many assignments (reports, etc.) that I had to do.	7.82	1.77
4. I did not make good progress in my studies, research, or graduation.	7.71	1.80
5. I got bad grades in exams and reports.	7.61	2.30
6. I was fired from my job (part-time job).	7.53	2.20
7. I started taking classes where the assignments (exams, reports, etc.) were very difficult.	7.34	1.83
8. I had to spend time on something unrelated to my ongoing work (study).	6.97	1.87
9. My hobbies and lessons did not improve as much as I would have liked.	6.97	2.02
10. I became dissatisfied with my current university.	6.82	2.51
11. I could not keep up with my classes.	6.79	2.36
12. I lost interest in the field of research that I am currently majoring in (or planning to major in).	6.74	2.48
13. I could not find a job (part-time job).	6.74	2.11
14. I could not get the job (part-time job) I wanted.	6.68	1.99
15. I was not satisfied with the performance of my assignments (reports, presentations, etc.).	6.61	1.91
16. I spent time on useless things.	6.29	2.49
17. I started taking classes that I was not interested in.	6.26	2.50
18. I could hardly answer the teacher's questions in class.	6.24	2.38
19. I quit my lessons or hobbies.	4.45	2.32

Table1 Mean and standard deviation of severity for each negative life event

Main investigation

A total of 203 university students (53 males and 153 females, mean age 18.95) were included in the analysis.

The negative situations specifically presented in this study were the "A1. Assignments were not completed by the due date" and "A2. Failure in anything related to the examination" situations selected by the preliminary survey. The eight types of consolations (B1-B8) were based on Nakano and Shobo (2011) 6 types plus Ogawa and Nakazawa (2014) 2 types (Table 2).

The participants were asked to rate the degree to which they could accept 8 types of consolation from their friends in 2 academic failure situations using a 5-point scale (1 = "not at all acceptable" to 5 = "very acceptable").

Kaneko's (1989) psychological distance scale was used to measure psychological distance from others. This scale was constructed based on research on parent-child and friend relationships, loneliness, and alienation. In this study, participants were asked to recall one friend with whom they spend most of their time, and were asked to rate 10 items such as "I trust my friend" on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all true, to 5 = very true). The average score of the 10 items is considered to be the person's psychological distance from his/her friends, and is used in the analysis. The sufficient discriminative power and equality of the psychological distance scale were confirmed by Kaneko (1998).

B1	Words of sympathy and admission. I'm sorry you had to go through that. That's hard ."
B2	Reassure them to look around them words that present a point of view. I've had that happen to me, too."
B3	Words of advice that serve as comments and objective advice. You should do that."
B4	Words of encouragement to encourage others. Let's go for it!"
B5	Offer of assistance at the pace of the student. Let me know if there's anything I can do." If it's okay with me, I'll listen."
B6	Change the subject or make a joke.
B7	Indirect encouragement. Talk to them more than usual. Take them somewhere to change their mood, etc.
B8	Physical contact. Tapping on the shoulder, hugging.

Table 2: 8 categories of consolation

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion of this study are presented below in three major sections.

Gender differences in acceptance of comfort from friends in failure situations.

Initially, a comparison of the gender differences in the mean scores for the acceptance of eight types of comforting methods was conducted to see if there were any differences between the data of male and female subjects analyzed in this study. The results showed that women were less likely than men to accept consolation in the "B3: Advice" and "B6: Change the subject or make a joke" consolation methods (B3 advice: $t(204) = 2.94, p < .01$; B6 change the topic/joke: $t(204) = 4.18, p < .01$). From this, it was inferred that there were differences in the acceptance of comfort between men and women, and that women may have more difficulty accepting some types of comfort than men. Therefore, in subsequent analyses, we decided to focus on women as the subjects of analysis, rather than combining data from men and women.

Types of consolation that women can and cannot accept from friends in academic failure situations.

A two-factor analysis of variance was conducted on the consolation accepted from friends in two academic failure situations: 2 situations \times 8 consolation methods. The results showed that the main effect of scene was significant ($F(1,152) = 6.027, p < .05$), and A1: task failure scene was significantly more likely to accept consolation than A2: exam failure scene.

The main effect of consolation ($F(7,1064) = 25.665, p < .01$) was significant, so a subtest was performed. As a result, the most and least acceptable consolations in the two academic failure situations were as follows. In all situations, the consolation that was most acceptable was consolation using B5's words of assistance that matched the other person's pace, such as "Please let me know if there is anything I can do" and "I will listen to you if it is okay with me" ($B5 > B1, B3, B4, B6, B7, B8$, all $p < .05$). This suggests that when consoling a friend who has failed academically, B5's words are more effective than B4's direct words of consolation, such as "do your best," or B3's advice, such as "you should do better," as they are more in tune with the other person's feelings and pace, and wait until the person feels like talking.

Conversely, the consolations that showed a common tendency to be difficult to accept were those using B6 to change the topic or make a joke ($B6 < B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, B7$, all $p < .05$). This suggests that when a friend is in an academic failure situation, the consolation of making a joke of B6 and cheerfully laughing it off is not so much sought after, but consolation that is attuned to the sadness and pain of the consolation receiver.

Furthermore, the interaction between academic failure situations and type of consolation was significant ($F(7,1064) = 21.344, p < .01$, see Table 3) and was subtested.

Average score of acceptance			
Types of consolation	A1.Task scene	A2.Exam scene	
B1. Sympathy and acknowledgement	3.43	3.42	
B2. Perspective presentation	3.89	3.44	**
B3. Advice	3.51	2.71	**
B4. Encouragement	3.68	3.28	**
B5. Assistance	3.92	3.59	**
B6. Change the subject or make a joke	2.75	2.72	
B7. Indirect encouragement	3.03	3.50	**
B8. Physical contact	2.73	3.10	**

** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10

Table 3: Degree of acceptance of different methods of consolation in 2 situations of academic failure.

The results of multiple comparisons using the Holm method showed that the degree of acceptance varied from scene to scene, especially for B3's "you should do ~" comment and comforting words of advice that served as objective advice. That is, they were less likely to accept the A2 exam failure scene, but more likely to accept the A1 task failure scene (A1 task scene: mean 3.510, A2 exam scene: mean 2.716, $p < .01$). From this, it can be inferred that words of advice are less likely to be accepted in examination failure situations where it is difficult to recover instantly and the next time is not immediately foreseeable.

B4 words of encouragement, such as "keep up the good work," tended to be accepted more readily in the two academic failure scenarios. In particular, they were even more likely to be accepted in the task failure situation than in the examination failure situation. In a situation such as the assignment failure situation, where the next chance comes quickly, the receiver's desire to do his/her best and the giver's encouragement to do his/her best are likely to coincide, making it easier to accept the words of encouragement. On the other hand, it was

clear that comfort through physical contact, such as a tap on the shoulder or a hug, was less acceptable than other forms of comfort in task failure situations.

Association between psychological distance and comfort acceptance in women.

We considered that even friends who are often together on a daily basis may not be able to accept consolation depending on the psychological distance between them. Among the 153 subjects analyzed, those who scored between 1.00 and 2.20 were divided into the close psychological distance group (84 subjects) and those who scored between 2.30 and 5.00 into the far psychological distance group (69 subjects) based on the overall mean psychological distance score (2.20). Then, a two-factor analysis of variance of psychological distance (near/far) \times type of consolation (8 types) was conducted for each negative situation. The results showed that in both of the two academic failure scenes, consolation from the far psychological distance group was significantly less acceptable than consolation from the near group (examination scene $F(1,151) = 18.48, p < .01$; task scene $F(1,151) = 10.42, p < .01$). These results indicate that even friends who are often together on a daily basis are less likely to accept consolation from friends who are psychologically distant from them than from those who are psychologically closer to them. It is thought that psychological distance from the other person is more important than time spent together in accepting consolation from the other person in academic failure situations.

The interaction between psychological distance (near/far) and type of consolation was significant in situations where the task was not completed ($F(7,1057) = 2.72, p < .05$). The results of the subtests showed that the consolation received from the far psychological distance group was significantly less acceptable than from the close group in the B1 sympathy and acknowledgement, B2 perspective presentation and B3 advice approaches (sympathy and acknowledgement, $F(1,1208) = 13.06, p < .01$; perspective presentation, $F(1,1208) = 15.59, p < .01$; advice, $F(1,1208) = 9.10, p < .01$). On the other hand, there was no effect of psychological distance on other types of consolation. This suggests that the effects of psychological distance and type of comfort on consolation acceptance are not uniform.

Conclusions

The present study revealed consolations that are easy to accept from friends and conversely, consolations that are difficult to accept. We feel that the specific clarification of consoling behavior, which has also been suggested to have a negative impact on the receiver, may support the development of good interpersonal relationships in daily life. Since this study focused on "academic failure situations" among the negative situations, we believe it is necessary to examine the acceptance of consolation in various situations, not limited to academic failure situations, in future studies.

In addition, in the examination of the combination of psychological distance and the type of consolation, it became clear that the psychological distance from the partner is more important than the time spent together in order to accept consolation from the partner in the academic failure situation. This suggests that when providing consolation, it is necessary to consider the psychological closeness between oneself and the other party while choosing consolation that the other party is likely to accept or consolation that is not affected by the psychological closeness if the psychological closeness is felt to be too far away from the other party.

In future research, we feel that it is necessary to set up the type of situation in which the consoling party is placed. Furthermore, more qualitative research is needed in the future, such as moving to interviews and examining the influence of past experiences on the acceptance of consolation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express our many thanks to Professor Kumiko Yoshitake for her guidance and encouragement in conducting this research.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to the many students who cooperated in the survey.

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