

Study of Family Environment and Adolescents' Positive Mental States viz. Happiness, Optimism and Hope: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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The present research aimed to study perceived family environment and positive mental states viz. happiness, optimism and hope among the adolescents of two different cultures, Iran and India. The total sample comprised 400 adolescents aged 16-19 from Iran and India; Out of which, half were males and half were females. Family environment scale, The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, Adult Trait Hope Scale, and The Life Orientation Test were performed and raw scores were subjected for various statistical analyses viz. Relationship, Personal Growth (Goal Oriented), and System Maintenance, are correlated with positive mental states viz. happiness, optimism and hope among the adolescents of the two above-mentioned cultures. It was also shown that there are cultural and gender differences among the studied variables.

Key words: Culture, Family Environment, Happiness, Hope, Optimism

Introduction

In most of the societies about a century ago, the family was the most valued system in almost all spheres of life and human living. Family is the only institution which provides the security and support without any rewards in return. The effectiveness of family functioning in conditioning the children's personality and social development has an outstanding importance (Roelfse and Middleton, 1985). The family interactions play an important role in the development of an individual. These interactions and interpersonal relationships are seen between parents, parent and child, siblings, and any other relative or person living in the household. The healthy functioning of these interaction patterns enhances mental health of the individual.

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Children need a happy and stable family environment and a conductive social network for their overall growth and development. Yet, happy families are not happy all the time. Disagreements and conflicts are a necessary part of living closely together. Both love and hate are to be expected in the intensity of family life and peers interactions, but it is the way negative emotions are handled that makes a difference to family life and social interactions (Parke and Buriel, 1998).

Parenting has long been recognized as making an important contribution to the development of competencies and problem behavior among children and adolescents. However, recently researchers have begun to develop attention to understanding variations in parenting in different cultures and how it is related to psychosocial outcomes in children and adolescents (Murry et al., 2001). Recent studies investigating parenting in different cultures have pointed to several important patterns regarding linkages between parenting strategies and psychosocial outcomes (Barber et al., 2003).

Research has shown that family dynamics is one of the most important elements affecting healthy child development. Positive family functioning can help mitigate the influence of other factors in child development, such as family income and family structure (Schaffer, 1998). Research shows that both overall family system functioning and parental behaviors are positively related to adolescent well-being (Grotevant, 1998; Karavasilis et al., 2003; Kauffman et al., 2000; Miyamoto et al., 2001; Muris et al., 2004; Wolfradt et al., 2002).

Cultural factors have been also found to affect adolescent mental health. Culture through parenting and societal norms and beliefs, plays an important role in adolescent behavior (Diaz, 2005). Culture influences the lives of adolescents in many ways: language, values, beliefs, as well as social norms and expectations. Through an adolescent's own experience of familial and cultural norms, he/she learns how to control culturally acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. In addition, culture affects parenting strategies, and the development of emotions and self-concept, which are all key components of adolescents' lives. The majority of recent studies have shown the significant effects of cultural variations in parenting on stress, psychosomatic symptoms, self-esteem, adjustment, and general well-being among adolescents (Barnes et al., 2000; Bean et al., 2003; Carlson et al., 2000; Dekovic, 1999; Halloran et al., 2002; Henry, 1994; Sartor and Youniss, 2002; Turner and Lapan, 2002).

The concept of well-being is sometimes used interchangeably with the term, happiness, although focus has been on other aspects, as well (Natvig et al., 2003). Child and youth life satisfaction research has focused on the study of

life satisfaction as an outcome variable, that is, most studies have investigated assumed determinants of individual differences in life satisfaction. Such studies have revealed a wide ranging network of associated variables (Gilman and Huebner, 2003). These variables include family, peer, neighborhood, self-related (personality, cognitive attributions), and activity (participation in structure extra curricular activities) variables. Demographic variables (gender, socioeconomic status) appear to play a very modest role at best in child or youth global life satisfaction reports. Many studies reported that psychological beliefs such as optimism, personal control, and a sense of meaning are known to be protective of mental health (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000; Fredrickson, 2001, 2002; Hagquist, 1998; Huebner, 2004; Huebner et al., 2000; Roelfse and Middleton, 1985; Sirohi, 2002; Taylor, 2000).

Regarding to what was mentioned above, here, this research aimed to study perceived family environment and positive mental states viz. happiness, optimism and hope among the adolescents of two different cultures, Iran and India. The main aims and objectives of this study are:

- 1- To study the relationship of adolescents' perceived family environment with positive mental states viz. happiness, optimism and hope.
- 2- To make a cross-cultural comparison among adolescents of Iran and India on perceived family environment and positive mental states viz. happiness, optimism and hope.
- 3- To study gender differences among adolescents of Iran and India on perceived family environment and positive mental states viz. happiness, optimism and hope.

Method

Participants

The total sample comprised of 400 adolescents aged 16-19. Two hundred adolescents were randomly selected from the public schools of Iran-Tehran city. Another two hundred adolescents from India-Tricities of Chandigarh, Panchkula and Mohali were selected; Out of which, half were males and half were females. Most of the subjects belonged to middle or upper-middle income groups.

Materials

Family environment scale by Moss and Moos (1994): The family environment scale (FES) consists of 90 "True-False" items, yielding 10 subscales which measure the three underlying sets of dimensions: Relationship dimension which includes Cohesion, Expressiveness, and

Conflict; Personal Growth dimension (or Goal Orientation) which includes Independence, Achievement Orientation, Intellectual-Cultural Orientation, Active-Recreational Orientation, and Moral-Religious Emphasis; and System Maintenance dimension which includes Organization and Control. The Relationship and System Maintenance dimensions primarily reflect internal family functioning, whereas the personal growth dimensions primarily reflect the linkages between the family and the larger social context. The reliability coefficients for the ten subscales were found to range from a low of 0.68 for independent to a high of 0.86 for cohesion, when test-retest method was used on 47 family members belonging to 9 families with a time interval of 8 weeks. The scale and its subscales have high content validity.

The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire by Hills and Argyle (2002): The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire was derived as an improved version of the Oxford Happiness Inventory by Argyle et al. (1989). The scale has 29 items which include the 20 items of the Oxford Happiness Inventory and an additional 9 items. Responses are based on a 6-point rating scale. Hills and Argyle (2002) reported acceptable validity for the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire by providing data on correlations with other self-report scales of personality traits, human strengths and subjective well-being. The scale possesses a high scale alpha reliability of 0.91. The inter-item correlations for Oxford Happiness Questionnaire ranged from -0.04 to 0.65. The personality variables correlate very strongly with this scale. In terms of construct validity, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire appears to be the preferred measure in terms of its construct validity.

Adult Trait Hope Scale by Snyder et al. (1991): The Hope scale is developed to measure individual differences of hope. It has two subscales: (1) Agency (goal-directed determination), and (2) Pathways (planning of ways to meet goals). The factor structure identifies the agency and pathways components and, as predicted, these two components are positively correlated. This scale has 12 items; 4 items are distracters and are not used for scoring. The agency subscale score is the sum of 4 items; the pathways subscale score is the sum of another 4 items. Hope is the sum of the pathways and agency items. The 4-point response continuum has been used in this scale. Scores range from a low of 8 to a high of 32. Cronbach alphas for the total hope score have ranged from 0.74 to 0.84. Test-retest reliability has been 0.80 or higher over time periods exceeding 10 weeks (Snyder et al., 1991). A series of studies

demonstrate acceptable internal consistency and test-retest reliability for the hope scale.

The Life Orientation Test by Scheier and Carver (1985): The Life Orientation Test measures dispositional optimism, which is defined as generalized positive outcome expectancies. It provides a self-report measure of individual differences in global optimism.

The scale has 12 items. Four items were positively phrased ("In uncertain times, I usually expect the best") and four were negatively phrased ("If something can go wrong for me, it will"). An additional four items (i.e. 2, 5, 6 and 8) were fillers and not using for scoring. Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree with score range of 8 (pessimist) to 32 (optimist). Scores were obtained by summing the scores on all the 8 items. The scale has alpha coefficient of 0.76 and test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.79 for a four week time interval; the authors report adequate convergent and discriminant validity.

Results

Means and standard deviations were calculated for both the cultural and gender groups. t-ratios were calculated to find out the significance of differences between Iranian and Indian adolescents and also between adolescent boys and girls (tables 5-6). Correlational analyses were also done to study the relationship of positive mental states viz. happiness, optimism, and hope, among adolescents of both the cultures with dimensions of family environment (tables 1-2).

Table 1. Correlation matrix for Iranian and Indian adolescents

Variables	Happiness		Optimism		Hope	
	IR	IN	IR	IN	IR	IN
Cohesion	0.45	0.20	0.36	0.06	0.32	0.03
Expressiveness	0.36	0.16	0.29	0.10	0.27	0.17
Conflict	-0.14	-0.05	-0.20	-0.05	-0.23	-0.20
Family environment relationship	0.47	0.17	0.33	0.05	0.27	-0.03
Independence	0.01	0.05	0.33	0.04	0.09	0.03
Achievement orientation	0.05	0.19	0.12	0.25	0.12	0.20
Intellectual-cultural orientation	0.27	0.09	0.25	0.03	0.14	0.20
Active-recreational orientation	0.38	0.14	0.42	0.10	0.25	0.03
Moral-religious emphasis	0.24	0.07	0.21	0.23	0.22	0.14
Family environment personal growth	0.30	0.21	0.36	0.24	0.25	0.21
Organization	0.34	0.13	0.35	0.13	0.23	0.13
Control	0.02	0.06	-0.05	0.08	0.14	-0.02
Family environment system maintenance	0.25	0.13	0.22	0.15	0.08	0.08

Correlation values significant at 0.05 level= 0.10. Correlation values significant at 0.01 level= 0.13

Results of correlation tables show that Adolescents' positive mental states are negatively related with conflict and positively related with cohesion and expressiveness dimensions of relationship dimension of family environment scale among almost all the adolescent boys and girls of Iran and India. Details of significant correlations are shown in table 1 and 2.

Table 2. Correlation matrix for adolescent boys and girls

Variables	Happiness		Optimism		Hope	
	IR	IN	IR	IN	IR	IN
Cohesion	0.26	0.47	0.14	0.34	0.18	0.19
Expressiveness	0.19	0.46	0.12	0.35	0.21	0.37
Conflict	-0.09	-0.18	-0.12	-0.78	-0.22	-0.27
Family environment relationship	0.23	0.49	0.08	0.32	0.10	0.18
Independence	0.07	0.22	0.02	0.14	0.08	0.23
Achievement orientation	0.17	0.18	0.22	0.24	0.30	0.27
Intellectual-cultural orientation	0.23	0.17	0.11	0.14	0.15	0.19
Active-recreational orientation	0.23	0.38	0.25	0.35	0.16	0.20
Moral-religious emphasis	0.20	0.26	0.23	0.30	0.33	0.24
Family environment personal growth	0.23	0.44	0.30	0.43	0.31	0.40
Organization	0.15	0.39	0.15	0.38	0.13	0.25
Control	0.02	0.09	-0.05	0.11	-0.01	-0.04
Family environment system maintenance	0.12	0.33	0.07	0.34	0.08	0.15

Correlation values significant at 0.05 level= 0.10. Correlation values significant at 0.01 level= 0.13

Also show that, Adolescents' positive mental states are positively related with personal growth dimensions of family environment scale viz.

Table 3. t-ratios comparing Iranian and Indian adolescents

Variables	Iranian (n=200)		Indian (n=200)		t-ratios
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Oxford Happiness Questionnaire	116.11	19.55	107.56	12.56	5.21
Optimism	29.15	6.34	26.72	5.14	4.21
Hope	25.24	3.51	21.71	3.36	10.27
Cohesion	5.79	2.06	5.78	1.40	0.06
Expressiveness	5.20	1.76	4.59	1.28	3.99
Conflict	3.59	1.70	4.01	1.70	2.50
Family Env. Relationship	14.61	7.25	14.37	2.38	0.93
Independence	5.46	1.54	4.82	1.53	4.14
Achievement Orientation	6.81	1.59	5.74	1.38	7.18
Intellectual-Cultural Orientation	4.61	1.44	4.47	1.48	0.89
Active-Recreational Orientation	4.89	1.95	4.54	1.68	1.92
Moral-Religious Emphasis	5.76	1.63	4.87	1.56	5.61
Family Env. Personal Growth	27.61	5.03	24.30	4.08	7.23
Organization	5.63	2.20	5.45	1.62	0.93
Control	4.86	1.83	4.47	1.51	2.27
Family Env. System Maintenance	10.49	3.13	9.93	2.25	2.05

t-value significant at 0.05 level= 1.96 t-value significant at 0.01 level= 2.58

Independence, achievement orientation, intellectual-cultural orientation, active recreational orientation, and moral-religious emphasis among almost all the adolescent boys and girls of Iran and India. Results of correlation tables also show that Adolescents' positive mental states are positively related with system maintenance dimensions of family environment scale viz. organization and control among almost all the adolescent boys and girls of Iran and India.

t-ratios show that Iranian and Indian adolescents are significantly different on positive mental states viz. happiness, optimism and hope; and different dimensions of family environment viz. expressiveness, conflict, independence, achievement orientation, moral-religious emphasis, control, and family environment system maintenance. Details of cultural differences are shown in table 3. t-ratios also show that adolescent boys and girls are significantly different on optimism, hope, and expressiveness dimension of family environment. Details of gender differences are shown in table 6.

Table 6- t-ratios comparing adolescent boys and girls

Variables	Boys		Girls		t-ratios
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Oxford Happiness Questionnaire	112.8	16.39	110.79	17.49	1.24
Optimism	27.30	5.70	28.56	6.02	2.15
Hope	23.60	3.90	23.35	0.65	4.68
Cohesion	5.64	1.7	5.93	1.75	1.65
Expressiveness	4.73	1.5	5.06	1.62	2.08
Conflict	3.88	1.7	3.73	1.69	0.90
Family Env. Relationship	14.25	2.4	14.73	2.65	1.87
Independence	5.20	1.68	5.08	1.44	0.80
Achievement Orientation	6.30	1.66	6.26	1.50	0.25
Intellectual-Cultural Orientation	4.49	1.47	4.60	1.46	0.75
Active-Recreational Orientation	4.61	1.75	4.82	1.90	1.15
Moral-Religious Emphasis	5.37	1.65	5.26	1.66	0.69
Family Env. Personal Growth	25.94	5.09	25.97	4.63	0.06
Organization	5.48	1.92	5.61	1.95	0.67
Control	4.74	1.72	4.59	1.65	0.89
Family Env. System Maintenance	10.22	2.72	10.20	2.76	0.07

t-value significant at 0.05 level= 1.96 t-value significant at 0.01 level= 2.58

Discussion

It is within a secure and stable family setting that a young adolescent can best learn concern for the well-being of others as well as self; moral values; empathy; and genuineness. The quality of relationships in the family is reflected in the adolescent's relationships with friends and later with neighbors, fellow citizens, colleagues, lovers, and with his or her own

children. Indeed, the family provides the link to wider values within the community and at the same time is controlled by those values. The adolescent's beliefs about social values, about what is decent and fair, are created in his or her family or origin (Halloran et al., 2002).

Many studies have shown that family plays an important role in adolescents' mental health. Apart from an individual's psychological resources, support from interpersonal networks, such as family and friends, is an important resource (Pearlin and Schooler, 1987).

Empirical data support the notion that the nature of the family environment (e.g., level of cohesion, degree of conflict, and organization) is strongly associated with adolescent mental health (Shulman et al., 1987; Siddique and D'Arcy, 1984). Family environment also influences adolescent mental health via its effect on self-esteem and sense of mastery. Some studies have shown that the more conflict and less cohesive the family environment is perceived to be, the lower the individual's level of self-esteem (Boys' and Girls' Association of Hong Kong, 1992).

In general, different styles of parental rearing have an effect on adolescents adjustment and behavior (Ash and Huebner, 2001; Caples and Barrera, 2006; Castro and Hernandez, 2004; Dubat et al., 2007; Formoso et al., 2000; Iwaniec, 2003; Olson and Gorall, 2003; Pettit et al., 2001; Robila and Krishnakumar, 2006; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006; Thapar, 2002; Van Der Zee et al., 2007; Zullig et al., 2005).

Implications of the study are that for mental health of the adolescents and enhancing their positive mental states, family can play a great role. Adolescents from a warm and supportive family environment, with high levels of organization, cohesion, and expressiveness, as compared with adolescents from a stressful family environment, characterized by high conflict and control, can adopt more positive mental states.

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