Life Satisfaction among High School Students: The Role of Parental Attachment and Gender

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ABSTRACT An attempt has been made to examine the effect of parental attachment and gender on the life satisfaction of high school students. The study adopted a 2 (students with high parental attachment versus students with low parental attachment) x 2 (boys versus girls) factorial design. Two hundred and forty students (one hundred twenty boys and one hundred twenty girls) of 9th and 10th grade are purposively sampled from six different urban schools of the khurda district of Odisha, India. They were administered the Inventory of Parent attachment. These two groups of 120 boys and 120 girls are further divided into two subgroups on the basis of the median split of their scores on the Parent attachment scale. The participants of all the four groups (boys with high parental attachment, boys with low parental attachment, girls with high parental attachment and girls with low parental attachment) are compared with respect to their life satisfaction. The result indicated that students with high parental attachment have higher score in different dimensions of life satisfaction like family, friend, living environment, school and overall life satisfaction than students with low parental attachment. Only in the dimension of self, there is no difference in life satisfaction. Further it is found that family satisfaction and school satisfaction scores in case of girls are higher than those of the boys.

Keywords: adolescent; parental attachment; gender; life satisfaction.

Introduction

The word adolescence refers to a transitional period between childhood and adulthood that typically begins with the onset of puberty and lasts until the age of eighteen to twenty four, when the individual enters young adulthood. It is a human developmental stage that involves a series of developmental hurdles and challenges, more specifically the development of identity, achieving independence from the family while staying connected and fitting into a peer group, as well as adjusting to numerous changes which include physical, emotional, psychological, social and moral changes.

Adolescents are required to adjust to the changes in the self, family, and in the peer group. In contemporary society, they experience institutional changes as well. Among young adolescents, there is a change in school setting, typically involving a transition from elementary school to either junior high school or senior high school. In the present study the respondents are in their early adolescent years, ranging from fourteen to fifteen years and they are in their senior high school.

Life satisfaction is defined as positive evaluation of one’s entire life according to the criteria determined by the individual himself (Diener, 1984) and it is related to individual’s experiences in the important areas of life like school, family etc. (Diener, 2000). Life satisfaction is often used interchangeably with the concepts of psychological well-being and subjective quality of life. Adolescent life satisfaction is a key indicator of a vast array of positive personal, psychological, social, interpersonal, and intrapersonal outcomes (Proctor et al., 2009). Correlational research have shown that life satisfaction is associated with self-esteem (Huebner, 1991), health related quality of life (Zullig et al., 2005), hope (Gilman et al., 2006), self-efficacy (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004), relationship with parents and peers (Man, 1991; Nickerson & Nagle, 2004), participation in structured extracurricular activities (Gilman, 2001), aspirations (Emmons, 1986), and academic achievement (Gilman & Huebner, 2006), and negatively correlated with psychopathological problems such as depression and social stress (Gilman & Huebner, 2006). Moreover, recent research suggests that increased life satisfaction buffers against the negative effects of stress and the development of psychological disorder. Further, cross-sectional data has shown life satisfaction to mediate the relationship between parental social support and both internal and external adolescent problem behavior (Suido & Huebner, 2004). Throughout the research literature, scores on measures of life satisfaction are used as an indication of happiness or unhappiness (Proctor et al., 2009).

Attachment theory plays an important role in the study of the cognitive, social, and emotional adjustment of adolescents. It reflects the core aspects of the ways through which they process affects, cognitions and behaviors, associated with qualities of past memories, present representations and future
expectations with regards to attachment and affective bonds (Zimmermann, 2004; Mayselless & Scharf, 2007). Specifically it makes the claim that the ability for an individual to form an emotional and physical attachment to another person gives a sense of stability and security necessary to take risks, branch out and grow and develop as a personality. Psychologist Bowlby (1969) was the first to coin the term. Parental attachment according to him is the amount of trust adolescents have in their relationships with their parents and he further states that attachment is a life-long, distinct behavioral system whose goal is proximity to the primary caretaker. He has pointed out that there are two types of attachment, secure and insecure, which is based on parent’s responses to children and children’s responses to parent’s in the time of stress during developmental stages. Ultimately, children who have secure attachments to their parents are likely to develop trusting, caring, and loving relationships as they mature and they are better adjusted (Armsden & Greenberg 1987).

Research has shown that a favorable parent child attachment serves as a protective factor for mental health problems (Walsh, Harel & Fogel, 2010). The quality of this attachment has an impact on the mental health of the adolescents (Reinherz, Giaconia, Pakiz, Silverman & Frost, 1993). Leung and Leung (1992) and Man (1991) studied Chinese adolescents and attempted to find out the effect of parental relationships on life satisfaction and they found parental attachment to be the strongest predictor of life satisfaction. Huebner's (1991) study on American adolescents revealed that satisfaction with family life was the strongest correlate of measures of psychological well-being. Further, Holahan (1995) studied American adolescents and found that, participants with higher level of parental support tend to have higher level of happiness and experienced less depression than those with lower level of parental support. Abubakar (2013) studied adolescents of Kenya and found that parental attachment plays an important role in the formation of identity and psychological well-being. Raja et al. (1992) studied adolescents of New Zealand and revealed that parental attachment was an important predictor and indicator of psychological health. Wilkinson and Walford (2001), in a study of over 400 Australian adolescents found that parental attachment had a significant influence on measures of life satisfaction.

Gender socialization has made boys and girls behave, think and feel differently about themselves. For girls, parental and peer support, family connectedness and relationships are important determinants of life satisfaction. On other hand feelings of mastery, self-actualization and academic performance are more important for boys. Gender differences with regard to life satisfaction have been reported in a number of studies (Diener, 1984; Dost, 2007). In earlier studies it was found that adolescent boys have higher satisfaction with regard to the dimension of “self” and “living environment” compared to adolescent girls, while girls showed greater satisfaction with peer relationship (Park & Huebner, 2005). A significant number of studies have reported higher satisfaction among boys compared to girls (Goldbeck, 2007; Kankotan, 2008; Köker, 1991). Nonetheless, such studies have been largely inconsistent as different instruments have been used to measure life satisfaction. In the present study an attempt has been made to find out the role of parental attachment and gender on the life satisfaction of adolescent students in Indian context.

**Method**

In this study, different measures were administered to assess the role of parental attachment and gender on the life satisfaction of high school students.

**Participants**

In the present study, two hundred and forty students (120 boys and 120 girls) of 9th and 10th grade are purposively sampled from six different urban schools of khurdha district of odisha, India. They belonged to the age group between fourteen to fifteen years. Care was taken to sample groups equated with respect to their socio economic status. All the participants are from the odiya medium schools. All of them were administered Inventory of Parent Attachment. Both the groups of high school boys and girls were divided into two sub groups on the basis of the median split of their scores on Parent attachment inventory. All the participants of four groups (boys with high parental attachment, girls with high parental attachment, boys with low parental attachment and girls with low parental attachment) were compared with respect to their life satisfaction.

**Measures**

In the present study, the measure of Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Revised) (IPPA-R) developed by Armsden & Greenberg (1987) and Multidimensional Students Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) developed by Heubner (2001) are administered.

**Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment Revised (IPPA-R).** The IPPA was developed by Armsden & Greenberg (1987) in order to assess adolescents’ perception of the positive and negative
affective/cognitive dimension of relationships with their parents and close friends particularly how well these figures serve as sources of psychological security. The scale assesses three broad dimensions such as degree of mutual trust; quality of communication; and extent of anger and alienation. IPPA-R is a self-report questionnaire with a five point Likert scale response format ranging from never true (1) to always true (5). The original version of IPPA consists of 28 items for parents and 25 items for peers, yielding two attachment scores. The revised version (Mother, Father, and Peer Version) is comprised of 25 items in each of the mother, father, and peer sections yielding three attachment scores. For the present research purpose only parent version (Father and Mother) of the IPPA-R are taken. The IPPA-R is scored by taking into account the reverse score items and then summing the response values in each section.

**Multidimensional Students Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS).** The Multidimensional Students Life Satisfaction Scale was developed by Huebner (2001) for the promotion of positive psychological well-being in children and adolescents (Compass, 1993; Sarason, 1997). This scale consists of 40 items under 5 domains consisting of Family (7 items), Friend (9 items), school (8 items), Living Environment (9 items) and Self (7 items). The respondents are asked to indicate their life satisfaction levels for each domain in 6 point Likert scale response format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Because the domains consist of unequal number of items, the domain and total scores are made comparable by summing the item responses and dividing by the number of domain (or total) items. The MSLSS is scored by reverse scoring the negatively worded items and then summing the response values in each domain. Higher scores thus indicate higher levels of life satisfaction throughout the scale.

**Procedure**

The study involved a 2 (adolescent students with high parental attachment versus adolescent students with low parental attachment) x 2 (boys versus girls) factorial design. The life satisfaction of participants of all the four groups (boys with high parental attachment, girls with high parental attachment, boys with low parental attachment and girls with low parental attachment) are compared with regard to different dimensions of life satisfaction which includes dimensions of family, friend, school, living environment, self and overall life satisfaction.

**Results**

The present investigation has employed multi-dimensional measures of life satisfaction variable which includes the consideration of satisfaction in five different dimensions. They are family, friend, school, living environment and self.

The summary of the analysis of variances of adolescent students with high parental attachment versus less attachment ones and boys versus girls on different dimensions of life satisfaction are presented in Table 1. The summary of the mean ratings of the participants on different dimensions of life satisfaction is presented in Table 2.

The Analysis of Variances (ANOVA) performed on different dimensions of life satisfaction indicate significant main effect for parental attachment in case of family, friend, school, living environment and overall life satisfaction except the dimension of self of the life satisfaction, $F(1,236)=24.64, P<0.01, F(1,236) = 15.01, P<0.01, F(1,236) = 8.76, P<0.01, F(1,236) = 11.16, P<0.01, F(1,236)=34.28, P<0.01,$ and $F(1,236) = 3.40, n.s,$ respectively (see Table 1). As shown by Table 2, adolescent students with high parental attachment have high family, friend, school, living environment and overall life satisfaction than adolescent students with low attachment to their parents ($M=40.49$ & $M=38.56$, $M=46.06$ & $M=44.10$, $M=44.70$ & $M=43.12$, $M=45.22$ & $M=43.24$, $M=36.10$ & $M=34.91,$ but in case of the dimension of self of life satisfaction, they have equal level of satisfaction in life ($M=42.63$ & $M=40.15,$ respectively). The analysis of variances (ANOVA) performed on family and school dimensions indicate significant main effect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life satisfaction Dimensions</th>
<th>sources</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Parental attachment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>220.62</td>
<td>24.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>57.72</td>
<td>6.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental attachment x Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Error</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.95</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1**

Summary of the Analysis of Variances Performed on Different Dimensions of Life Satisfaction of Participants

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### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life satisfaction Dimensions</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Males M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Females M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Combined M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friend</strong></td>
<td>High Parental attachment</td>
<td>39.88</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>41.09</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>40.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Parental attachment</td>
<td>38.17</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>38.94</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>38.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>39.03</td>
<td>40.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School</strong></td>
<td>High Parental attachment</td>
<td>46.32</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>45.79</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>46.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Parental attachment</td>
<td>43.58</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>44.62</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>44.95</td>
<td>45.21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living Environment</strong></td>
<td>High Parental attachment</td>
<td>45.63</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>44.80</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>45.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Parental attachment</td>
<td>42.95</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>43.52</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>43.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>44.29</td>
<td>44.16</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*P < 0.05  
**P < 0.01
for gender, $F(1,236) = 6.45$, $P<0.05$, $F(1,236) = 4.92$, $P<0.05$, respectively (see Table 1). As shown by Table 2, girls have better family and school satisfaction than boys ($M=40.02$ & $M=39.03$, $M=44.51$ & $M=43.38$, respectively). The analysis of variances performed on friend, living environment, self and overall life satisfaction showed non significant effect for gender, $F(1,236) = 0.25$, n.s, $F(1,236) = 0.05$, n.s, $F(1,236) = 0.54$, n.s, $F(1,236) = 0.14$, n.s respectively (see Table 1). As shown by Table 2, boys and girls do not differ in the dimensions of friend, living environment, self and overall life satisfaction ($M=44.95$ & $M=45.21$, $M=44.29$ & $M=44.16$, $M=35.73$ & $M=35.27$, $M=41.31$ & $M=41.47$ respectively).

Discussions

The present study provides empirical evidence supporting the role of parental attachment and gender on different dimensions of life satisfaction of adolescent students. The findings clearly showed that students having high parental attachment have higher life satisfaction in dimensions of family, friend, school, living environment and overall life satisfaction than students having low attachment with their parents. Only in the dimension of self there is no difference in life satisfaction. This may be happening because patterns of contact in emergency situations, as opposed to ordinary contact, might be a critical attachment function across the life span (Waters & Cummings, 2000). It is clear that adolescents' perception of how their parents feel about them (i.e., loving them, being interested in them, appreciating them, etc.) is the most important factor associated with their satisfaction with themselves and their lives. Material rewards do not appear to have an appreciable effect on adolescents' overall satisfaction with life nor does perception of closeness to their parents.

Edwards and Lopez (2006) found that perceptions of supportive family relationships have been linked with increase in indicators of wellness such as life satisfaction and subjective well-being. A study by Greenberg and colleagues (1983) showed that the perceived quality of the adolescents' relationships with their parents is significantly related to their perceived life satisfaction. They also found that the quality of attachment to parents was significantly more powerful in predicting adolescent well-being. Adolescents, who were securely attached to their parents reported higher self-esteem, enjoyed frequent and satisfactory communication with their families, reported less symptomatic response to stressful life events, and also had higher quality relationships with their peers. On the other hand, adolescents with less secure attachment to parents reported feelings of resentment and alienation, and a detached quality of relationships with their peers. So adolescents with low parental attachment may be given intensive remedial training.

The finding also reveals that adolescent girls are more satisfied in the family and school dimension of life satisfaction in comparison to the adolescent boys. But there is no gender difference in the other dimensions like friend, living environment, self of life satisfaction. The finding also reveals that there is no gender difference in overall life satisfaction.

Regarding gender differences in domain specific life satisfaction, our results showed that girls were more satisfied with their family life than boys. This could be related with findings indicating that life satisfaction in girls is positively explained by perceived social support. Perceived availability of emotional support, reassurance, instrumental assistance, and companionship provided by social network partners such as family have consistently been reported to be related to better life satisfaction. In general, girls are more sensitive to their social networks than boys. A meta-analysis conducted by Pinquart and Sörens
analysing 286 studies indicated that integration in social networks was more closely related to life satisfaction of girls than boys.

Girls showed more satisfaction in the domain of school may be because school satisfaction reflects a domain of communion. Moreover, if girls are more sensitive regarding relationships, as suggested by Helgeson (1994), the effects of school related social support on school satisfaction and scholastic competence may be stronger for girls than for boys. However, gender roles are changing across the world, and this change reduces the likelihood of the traditional socialization of gender roles. However, meta-analytic reviews of gender difference on international studies of life satisfaction do not reveal a clear cut picture (Kapteyn, Smith & Soest, 2011).

Further, the result revealed that boys and girls have equal level of satisfaction with their friends, living environment and dimension of self. This may be happening due to the fact that as earlier girls were not allowed to go outside in the evening, they were not even allowed to go forward and make more friends, they were encouraged to stay reserved always, and were always asked to sacrifice, hide and repress their desires for the sake of others happiness. But now due to the changing socialization process, girls are given equal opportunities and facilities with regard to boys. So as a result, boys and girls have been found to have equal level of satisfaction in the dimensions of friend, living environment and self.

These findings emphasize new approaches to the development of life satisfaction, emphasizing the active role of the parents to make better sense of their children's world, and the powerful influence of cultural surroundings on adolescents thinking and behavior. People are not born with characteristics of men and women, individualistic or collective orientation, high or less satisfied in life, and so on. Rather they become adults with certain characteristics through being taught and trained in particular culture.

The findings of the study highlight the general overview of the current Indian adolescent’s life satisfaction. However, the findings must be viewed in relation to the limitation of the study. The respondents of the study were selected from the urbanized cities, and thus limit the generalizability of the findings to adolescent population of India. Future study on this issue would be extended to adolescents of other areas in the country in order to have a more comprehensive picture of Indian adolescents’ life satisfaction.

References