

Parental Bonding, Social Exclusion and Perceived Stress Among Young Adults

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Abstract

This study investigated a relationship between parental bonding and social exclusion and perceived stress in young adults in India as well as gender variation in these variables. The paper relied on the Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), Need-Threat Model of Social Exclusion (Williams, 2007), and Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The quantitative correlational design was employed, and the data were collected using purposive sampling method and 300 young adults (150 men and 150 women) between the ages of 18-25 years were used to collect data across India. Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), Ostracism Experience Scale and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) were the standardized measures that were taken. The correlation, regression, and independent samples t-tests were carried out with the help of JAMOVI. In the findings, reality had it that maternal bonding ($r = -.042$, $p = .469$) and paternal bonding ($r = -.006$, $p = .918$) did not have a significant correlation with social exclusion as would be expected by traditional attachment theory. The social exclusion exhibited a strong positive relationship with the perceived stress ($r = .298$, $p = .001$) and was a significant predictor ($b = .298$, $p = .001$) with 8.9 percent explaining the perceived stress. There was no significant gender difference in maternal bonding ($t(304) = 0.77$, $p = .444$) or paternal bonding ($t(304) = 1.32$, $p = .188$). These findings reveal that in youthful adulthood, modern interpersonal experiences and social exclusion, in particular, have a direct impact on psychological stress more than the early parental relationships. They are discussed in terms of implications on mental health practice, educational institutions and future cross-cultural studies.

Keywords: Parental Bonding, Social Exclusion, Perceived Stress, Young Adults, Attachment Theory, Gender Differences, Indian Context

Introduction

The young adult stage is one when relationships, formation of identity and independence are majorly changed. This is a sensitive period in which people are vulnerable to psychosocial problems like a perceived stress and social exclusion. The parental bonding which can be described as the quality of emotional attachment and nurturing practices between parents and children presents a model through which people can address these challenges (Bowlby, 1969). Proper parental control, care, and warmth are the best parental attachment that provides a safe base of emotional regulation and development of social competence. The secure attachment leads to resilience, providing the young adults with adaptive

coping strategies and positive self-concept that allows them to cope with stress and develop healthy peer relationships. On the other hand, these developmental processes may be disrupted by having poor or insecure parental attachment, that is, neglect, overprotective or inconsistent (Parker, Tupling, and Brown, 1979). These deficits can put young adults in a predisposed position to undergo the social exclusion of being ignored or rejected by peers which can in turn affect their ability to handle the situation as explained in the Need-Threat Model by Williams (2007). Social exclusion as such is a strong stressor which directly endangers the ground level of psychological needs leading to emotional distress and loneliness. In the case where people do not have the internal resources that are nurtured by safe parental relationships, the sense of being sidelined can be transferred to high perceived stress. The perceived stress is a subjective evaluation of life demands in comparison with the ability to cope (Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein, 1983). It does not only involve the things that people are exposed to, but their mental assessment over capacity to handle whatever it is. The study will investigate the interrelation between these three constructs in which positive parental bonding plays a protective role in lowering exposure to social exclusion which in turn lowers perceived stress. There is also an interest in the possible gender differences in these relationships because it is known that attachment to opposite sex parents may have a unique effect on the psychological wellbeing of young adult men and women. Such dynamics need to be understood to create specific interventions that can be used to improve mental health in this critical development period.

Theoretical Framework

Attachment Theory

The Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) states that the children form emotional attachments to the primary caregivers, which form the security base that promotes exploration and adaptive social behavior. The impacts of these early attachments are involved in the development of the internal working model of relationship that shapes the way people perceive and react to the social events over the life span. Strong attachment to parents promotes emotional control and social effectiveness, and insecure or interrupted attachment promotes more vulnerability to social challenges and mental distress (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1989). This theory explains the social and emotional consequences of the initial attachment relationships as the structural constituents of parental bonding.

Need-Threat Model of Social Exclusion

The Need-Threat Model of Social Exclusion (Williams, 2007) is the developed theory of social exclusion, which states that being socially excluded, in spite of its apparent harmlessness, is a great danger to four basic psychological needs, namely, belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence. These are the main psychological needs, which are endangered by social exclusion and lead to a potentially serious psychological suffering and adverse affect. Particularly, the experience of social exclusion lowers the sense of belonging and it brings about the feeling of disconnection; threat to self esteem, which means that the person is socially undesirable; loss of control, which leads to feelings of powerlessness; and a lack of meaningful existence, which causes people to wonder about their relevance and worth to others. The individuals are then involved in cognitive and behavioral activities to relieve and recover threatened needs, including taking up new relationships, asserting self-worth, and exerting control over situations.

Transactional Model of Stress

The concept of the Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) does not view stress as a

predetermined end point achieved through the action of external stressors, but as a dynamically changing process being formed when individuals and their environments interlock. Accent on the external demands is stressed in this model where the stress lies in assessing the stressors in relation to individual coping resources. Stress is encountered when people feel that the demands surpass their coping functions. Cognitive appraisal is therefore critical in the development of perception and reactions to stress that define the meaning attached to situations and evaluation of available coping resources.

Perceived Stress Theory

Perceived Stress Theory was introduced by Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein (1983) and the authors focused on the subjective aspect of stress. Stress does not just occur when there are demands on the environment, but when people decide that life demands are far beyond their ability to cope or manage. It is the perception of stress, rather than the objective stressors, which is more important as far as psychological and physiological consequences are concerned. Parental attachment during childhood has a great impact on the way people understand and react to stress when they are older. Secure and supportive relationships result in children having adaptive coping, improved emotional regulation and resiliency, as stressors are perceived as less threatening and more manageable by them. On the other hand, children whose family relationships are weak or irregular struggle to acquire emotional support and model coping making them more susceptible to stress.

Parental Bonding Theory

Parental Bonding Theory (Shahbaz et al., 2021) emphasizes the significance of early emotional connections between parents and children and their enduring impact on subjective wellbeing through adulthood. According to the theory, optimal parental bonding characterized by high care and appropriate control predicts more positive mental health outcomes generally. Quality parental bonding is associated with reduced social interaction anxiety and enhanced social competence. Relationships formed with parents, characterized by expressed love and trust through developed bonds, equip children with greater social interaction skills and reduced anxiety about potential social exclusion.

Statement of the Problem

To determine the correlation between Parental Bonding and Social Exclusion and its consequences on Perceived Stress and its effects compared in terms of gender.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

Aim

The primary objective of this work is to investigate the complex interdependence between the parental bonding, the social exclusion and perceived stress among young adults aged 18- 25 years in India. The two hypotheses of the research are to determine the association of maternal and paternal bonding independently to social exclusion and to determine how social exclusion impacts perceived stress in the young adulthood. Also, the research investigates the existence of significant gender differences in the trends of maternal and paternal bonding.

Objectives

- To determine the maternal bonding-social exclusion relationship within the young adults.
- To determine the paternal bonding-social exclusion relationship within the young adults.
- To determine how social exclusion influences the way young adults feel stressed.
- To examine gender variations about relationship among maternal bonding.
- To examine gender variations about relationship among paternal bonding.

Hypotheses

- H1: Higher maternal bonding will have relationship with lower social exclusion among young adults.
- H2: Higher paternal bonding will have relationship with lower social exclusion among young adults.
- H3: Increased social exclusion is not associated with higher perceived stress.
- H4: There is no significant gender difference in the strength and nature of the relationships among maternal bonding.
- H5: There is no significant gender difference in the strength and nature of the relationships among paternal bonding.

Need and Significance

The research is geared towards reviewing the intricate interaction between parental bonding and social exclusion and perceived stress in young adults and it is unique in its approach of considering parental bonding as a predisposing factor to both social and psychological stress in an attempt to make some gender comparison. The study is relevant, and the parental bonding is likely to be one of the most established youth predictors of the mental health and social functioning. Youth and parental relationship may also be associated with less anxiety, better emotional regulation, and more positive socialization, and this relationship provides the youth with an excellent base in the formation of coping resources and resilience (Kidd et al., 2022). Parental relationships should be established with the youth as good relationships evoke a feeling of safety, trust, and social adequacy and negotiating relationships and challenging periods might become easier (Orekhova, 2014). On the other hand, in a comparative reasoning, social exclusion, or peer rejection could negatively affect mental processes of the youth, in that it could augment stress levels, conceal loneliness, as well as influence mood, in addition to creating other psychological disorders that can reverse access to social bonding or community security (Williams, 2007).

This research would help add to the body of literature on the relationship between parental relationships and the ability to establish a protective role against social exclusion and perceived stress in a bid to comprehend the value of using social-emotional support to support health emotional development among the young adults. In literature, it is argued that parent relationship styles can potentially define the quality of parental relationships which can be applied in bringing a safe and secure attachment style, which is a major contributor to the social and emotional adjustment issues of young adults. Social-emotional support, effective coping mechanisms, and emotional regulation coping skills analysis assists in the minimization of the effects of both social exclusion and perceived stress in young adults, which can be incorporated with the help of a social-emotional deer (Fahs et al., 2022; Kidd et al., 2022).

Method

Research Design

The research design of this study is a correlational research in order to address the relationship between the variables of interest among the young adults. Individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 years were included in the sample population. The sample size was purposive sampling strategy to get the total sample of 306 people, where the ratio was 150 males and 150 females respectively. This was through the administration of the questionnaires that were in question to measure the constructs under question.

Participants

Young adults are the target population of the study. The age groups are between the ages of 18 years and 25 years. The study involves both females and males. The geographical region that was targeted in the

research was India.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Purposive Sampling Technique has been used for data collection.

Inclusion Criteria

Ages 18-25

Capable of recalling and narrating on parental bonding experiences.

Capable of responding and comprehending questionnaires in the English language.

Capability to give informed consent to participate.

Exclusion Criteria

Young adults diagnosed with cognitive or intellectual disability that affect cognitive skills.

Persons who are in the process of treatment of a severe psychiatric disorder (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder).

Individuals that have undergone any major traumatic experience or other life events that might have led to stress levels in the recent past 6 months on their own.

Tools for Study

Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI)

PBI is a self-report test that measures the perceptions of parental attitudes and behaviors in the first 16 years of life. The scale includes 25 questions per parent. The tool has been found to be very reliable with Cronbach alpha of 0.85 in care subscale and 0.80 in overprotection subscale.

Ostracism Experience Scale

The scale is used to examine the experiences of being ostracized or ignored by other people in social situations. It determines the rate of occurrence and the level of emotions triggered by ostracism which poses a danger to the fundamental psychological needs such as belonging, self esteem, control and meaningful existence. Internal consistency according to the psychometric testing is high with the Cronbach alpha being in the range of 0.85 to 0.90.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)

The PSS is a popular psychological tool that measures the extent of situations in their lives that they perceive to be stressful, including the ways of predicting, being unable to control, and feeling overwhelmed during the past month. The 10 item version uses a 5-point Likert response scale (0 = never to 4 = very often). It has a good internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.78 to 0.91 among various groups of people.

Procedure

The sampling method adopted was purposive whereby a sample size of 300 young adults aged between 18-25 years were selected but equally divided between males and females living in various sections of India. The potential respondents were approached online via academic networks and social media. Interested people were given a Google Form containing the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation and right against withdrawal with no consequences. All participants were informed about the study through electronic informed consent and the questionnaire battery was administered to them. Parental Bonding Instrument, Ostracism Experience Scale, and Perceived Stress Scale questionnaires were conducted by means of Google Forms. Data were organized, coded and fitted to be analyzed using JAMOVI software.

Statistical Analysis

JAMOVI software was used to perform a statistical analysis. Shapiro-Wilk test was used to test normality. Correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships among maternal bonding, paternal bonding, social exclusion and perceived stress. The perceived stress predictor in relation to social exclusion was analyzed by using simple linear regression. Gender differences in mother and father scores on parental bonding were analyzed using independent samples t-tests and Mann-Whitney U tests.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in compliance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (2017), especially Section 8: Research and Publication. Kristu Jayanti College, Bangalore gave institutional permission. All participants received informed consent, with information on voluntary participation, right to withdraw, and anonymity and confidentiality. Plagiarism was not done by citing all the sources used.

Results

Normality Testing

Shapiro-Wilk test was performed to evaluate data normal distribution. Maternal bonding ($W = 0.960, p < .001$) and paternal bonding ($W = 0.913, p < .001$) were not normally distributed. The reason, however, is that the sample size ($N = 306$) was large enough to use the Central Limit Theorem to justify the use of parametric tests. These included both parametric and non- parametric group comparisons.

Correlation Analysis

Table 1

The correlation table of the significant study variables will be provided in Table 1.

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3
Maternal Bonding	306	–	–	–		
Paternal Bonding	306	–	–	.624***	–	
Social Exclusion	306	–	–	-.042	-.006	–
Perceived Stress	306	–	–	–	–	.298***

Note. $N = 306; **p < .001$

Paternal bonding was also positively correlated with maternal bonding ($r = .624, p < .001$), and thus those who reported high levels of maternal bonding had reported higher levels of paternal bonding. There was no significant relationship between maternal bonding and social exclusion ($r = -.042, p = .469$). Likewise, paternal bonding was found to show no significant relation with social exclusion ($r = -.006, p = .918$). These results show that parental bonding was not an predictor of social exclusion in this sample. The social exclusion showed a strong positive correlation with perceived stress ($r = .298, p = .001$) the participants who reported higher social exclusion has reported higher psychological stress.

Regression Analysis

Table 2
Simple Linear Regression to Predict Perceived Stress based on Social Exclusion.

Predictor	b	SE	β	t	p	R ²
Social Exclusion	0.172	0.032	.298	5.45	< .001	.089

Note. N = 306

The findings showed that the social exclusion was a significant predictor of perceived stress (b = 0.172, SE = 0.032, β = .298, t(304) = 5.45, p = .001). The perceived stress scores had the model explained a small to moderate effect size (R² = .089) of 8.9 percent. Those participants who reported increased rates of social exclusion experiences also reported increased levels of perceived stress.

Gender Differences

Table 3
Parental Bonding Gender Differences.

Variable	t-test	p	Mann-Whitney U	p	Interpretation
Maternal Bonding	0.77	.444	11145	.440	Not Significant
Paternal Bonding	1.32	.188	10812	.191	Not Significant

Note. N = 306; df = 304 for t-tests

No significant gender difference in maternal bonding (t (304) = 0.77, p = .444) or paternal bonding (t (304) = 1.32, p = .188) was found using independent samples t-tests and Mann-Whitney U tests. There was no difference in attachment between males and females towards each parent.

Discussion

Parental Bonding and Social Exclusion

The finding that neither maternal or paternal bonding was significantly related to social exclusion is again counterintuitive to classical theory of attachment in which the early caregiver relations are used to form internal working models that govern further social relations and expectations (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1989). Security of attachment should make children who are securely attached more socially competent and less susceptible to rejection of their peers (Sroufe et al., 2005). However those results align with studies that have hypothesized that parental attachment effects may be less critical in young adulthood, in a time when peer relationships are also assuming an augmenting position (Fraley and Davis, 1997; Nickerson and Nagle, 2005). Parental attachment has been determined to offer emotional security even during adulthood but the magnitude of its direct impact on outcome with peers may decrease at this age (Allen and Land, 1999). There are several ways of explaining this finding. To begin with, young adulthood is defined by the change of a family based social network to peer based social network (Arnett, 2000). The social exclusion experiences may be more linked to the peer related processes, social competence and situations than to the childhood bonding experiences at the current stage (Leary, 2001). Second, social exclusion is typically contingent and based on temporary situational aspects of the environment like group norms, social comparisons, and computer-mediated communication (Williams, 2007). Third, the relationship within a family may be more uniformly

positive in collectivistic cultural groups, such as in India, which may also limit the range of bonding scores, as well as counteract the impact of statistical relationships (Kagitcibasi, 2005). These results are consistent with those of other researchers who have utilized non-Western samples and have found that parental attachment is not necessarily the predictor of peer relationship outcomes as observed in Western samples (Chao, 2001; Rothbaum et al., 2000). It is possible that the attachment experiences to peer interactions are mediated by cultural factors.

Social Exclusion and Perceived Stress

The positive relationship between social exclusion and perceived stress and social exclusion securing 8.9 percent of the variance of stress scores is substantial in supporting the psychological need-to-belong theory (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) that human beings have a basic need to belong, and that a threat to belongingness is a great source of psychological discomfort. This finding is in line with the enormous volumes of experimental and correlational data indicating that social exclusion is a potent source of psychological stress. It has also been demonstrated in cyberball and other paradigms of experimentation that even in test-based exclusion, negative affect, threatened self-esteem, and elevated levels of cortisol release can occur (Williams et al., 2000; Eisenberger et al., 2003). Longitudinal research has revealed that perceptions of social exclusion are anticipatory of later depressive, anxiety and psychological distress (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). We could explain this relationship in a number of ways. Social exclusion is a threat to fundamental psychological fulfillment of self-esteem, control, meaningful existence and belonging (Williams, 2009). It involves brain regions associated with the experience of physical pain, suggesting the neurobiological similarities between social and physical pain (Eisenberger, 2012). In addition, being excluded disrupts the availability of social support mechanisms that help absorb stress (Cohen and Wills, 1985). The young adulthood phase is a period of development whereby the approval of peers becomes central in identity development (Erikson, 1968). Undergraduates in their new social worlds, friendships, and social identities are particularly vulnerable to the effects of exclusion (Pittman and Richmond, 2008). Recent results indicate that immediate interpersonal experiences have a stronger influence on perceived stress compared to the past family relations, which is in line with the notion that it is the present interpersonal circumstances that influence psychological wellbeing (Hawkley et al., 2008).

Gender Differences

The lack of gender differences in maternal or paternal attachment is in contradiction with some previous research that females are more likely to describe more intimate emotional bonds with parents, especially mothers (Kenny and Gallagher, 2002; Lieberman et al., 1999). This result, however, compares with more recent findings that gender differences between parent and child relationships are perhaps narrowing as gendered parenting roles are becoming less salient as fathers increasingly participate in child-rearing emotionally (Cabrera et al., 2000; Lamb, 2010). Traditional gender roles as practiced in Indian society has historically placed more emphasis on the mother-daughter relations and also more hierarchical father-son relations (Kakar, 1981). Yet, these traditional motifs are possibly changing in modern urban India because of urbanization as well as increased levels of education and altered families (Seymour, 1999). This lack of gender differences in this sample may be due to these more general sociocultural changes toward more egalitarian family formation. Also, the perceived parental bonding might not only be based on gender but on various factors such as temperament, family dynamics and cultural values (Rohner, 2004). The similarity in bonding described by both males and females in this

study may indicate that Indian young adults, either gender, have similarly positive and nurturing views of their relationships with parents.

Summary and Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The current paper examined the relationships between parental bonding (maternal and paternal) and social exclusion and perceived stress among young adults in India and gender differences. These assumptions led to the choice of the Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) and Belongingness Theory (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) on the premise that a well-developed and healthy parent-child relationships would lower the rate of social exclusion, and the latter would lower the perceived stress.

Key findings revealed that:

Maternal and paternal bonding and social exclusion did not have a significant correlation as it was postulated in the hypotheses of H1 and H2. The social exclusion had a positive significant association with perceived stress and was identified as a significant predictor (8.9% of the variance) and supported hypothesis H3. Maternal or paternal bonding did not have any significant gender differences, accepting hypothesis H4 and H5. This is indicative that in the young adulthood the influence of short-term interpersonal events, particularly social rejection, on psychological stress surpasses the contribution of early parent-child relationships. Such developmental stage can be aligned with the theories that can be used to explain the emerging significance of peer networks during this age. The absence of gender difference in the perception of bonding can be attributed to the evolving, less hierarchical, family structures in the contemporary urban India.

Theoretical Implications

The present research has supported hypotheses of development that imply the shift in family attachment to peer relations during young adulthood (Baltes et al., 2006). The findings indicate that the ecological systems theory is reflected in the influence of immediate social environment on psychological well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The results can be considered positive contributions to the cross-cultural attachment research due to the fact that they show that predictive correlations amid parent-child bonds and peer effects are not as robust in collectivistic context as western participants (Rothbaum et al., 2000). However, the fact that exclusion and stress are mutually dependent can be used to justify omnipresence of belongingness needs.

Practical Implications

Mental Health Practice: Clinicians working with young adults should assess mental health Social belongingness in the present and family history. Interventions focusing on peer relationship, social skills, and inclusion could be used with more advantage in the short-run than those focusing on family-of-origin issues (Conley et al., 2015). **Educational Institutions:** Universities are encouraged to implement programs which promote a sense of belonging like the peer mentoring programs, inclusive programs and anti-discrimination policies. They have demonstrated that the interventions of belongingness can result in the enhancement of the psychological and academic performance (Walton and Cohen, 2011). **Policy Recommendations:** Mental health policies serving young adults should be structured towards creation of favourable social conditions. Campus mental health service resource should be funded in terms of group-based interventions and community-building program (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

Limitations of the Study

It will not be possible to causally interpret the relationships between parental bonding, social exclusion,

and perceived stress with the help of the cross-sectional design. This was due to the fact that the parental bonding scores were not normally distributed and consequently, there was little variability which might have compromised correlations and statistical power. The social desirability bias, recall bias and common method variance may be threats to self-report measures. The samples that Indian university students are confined to limit the generalization of the findings to the population outside the university, older adults, and other cultures. The evaluation of the current peer attachment and other relationship variables that may constitute sources of social experience are omitted but parental attachment is taken into account. Unmeasured confounding variables (e.g. personality traits, socioeconomic status, mental health history) may influence the results. Mediator analysis (social exclusion) with no information of the other potentially functioning mechanisms of self-esteem, coping, or emotion regulation.

Future Research Recommendations

Plans that are followed by people since adolescence as young adults to track the patterns of development so as to establish the time precedence. Peer attachment test and parental bonding test to observe the mediating/moderating effect of the family influences using existing peer relationships. Some of the mediator investigation that include self-esteem, coping style, emotion regulation, and social competence as the potential connecting processes. Individualistic and collectivistic societies are also to be compared to each other, in order to follow the cultural specificity and universality of the found relations. Online social exclusion experiment on how cyberostracism influences perceived stress in digitally connected young adults. Exploration of contextual conditions like the climate in campuses, access to social support and institutional policies that may lessen the harmful impact of exclusion on stress. Samples of non-student populations, different socioeconomic statuses and older adults to enhance the degree of generalization. Qualitative studies like interviews and focus groups to provide situational data on experiences of young adults on bonding, exclusion as well as stress. Experimental trials of intervention research with the inclusion related interventions in order to establish the evidence based practices and cause and effect relationships. Cortisol, heart rate variability, or neuroimaging could be a biological marker of cortisol, physiological processes through which it is hypothesized that exclusion is associated with stress.

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