

The Learnt Factors in Stress: The Role of Family Environment

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The present study examined the role of family environment in stress and anxiety of adolescents. The sample of 200 adolescents (100 male and 100 female) from Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh. Step-wise regression analysis was done to find out the main predictors of adolescents' stress and anxiety. The main findings point to the following facts: (i) In females sample, conflict (+), expressiveness (-), cohesion (-) and achievement orientation (+) have significantly contributed 32% of variance in state anxiety collectively, whereas, in trait anxiety, organization (-), conflict (+) and control (+) have turned out to be the significant predictors contributing 20% of variance in totality. (ii) On psycho-social stress, conflict (+), moral religious emphasis (-), control (+) and organization (-) have contributed 48% significant variance in females sample, whereas, on life-events stress only cohesion (-) and moral religious emphasis (-) have significantly contributed 36% of variance. In males sample, cohesion (-), conflict (+) and independence (+) are the significant predictors of state anxiety as these variables have collectively shown 31% of variance, whereas, in trait anxiety, conflict (+), control (+) and organization (-) have explained 23% of significant variance. (iii) On psycho-social stress, conflict (+) moral-religious emphasis (-) and organization (-) are the significant predictors showing 21% of variance and in life events stress, cohesion (-), moral-religious emphasis (-) and organization (-) are the significant predictors contributing 36% of variance in totality. (iv) The results further reveal the commonness of conflict and cohesion in predicting the anxiety and stress of adolescents.

Keywords: Family environment, Stress, Anxiety, Gender

In our complex and changing world, humans are confronted with problems to which finding solutions are not easier. Modern life is full of stress and this stress ranges from personal day to day life to one's organizational activities. Life becomes all the more difficult if it comes to adolescents as adolescence is that span of one's life where change is inevitable in almost all aspects of life, be it physical, emotional psychological, social, behavioural or environmental. Out of all the stages of one's life, adolescence represents a difficult developmental period whereby many demands are imposed on the adolescents by others and by themselves as well (Tung & Sandhu, 2008).

As a human organism, an individual cannot escape either from genetic inheritance or keep away from the socio-cultural impacts of the environment in which he lives. Heredity provides the potential and the environment provides the opportunities for unfolding the same. Out of the socio-cultural environments, family environment is the most important. It provides significant impact in regulating and integrating the behavioural patterns of the individual.

Poor family environment in terms of parental hostility, rejection and inconsistencies can all contribute to psychological problems viz., anxiety, stress, neuroticism, depression and many others (Sharma, Verma & Malhotra,

2008). The family is the backdrop in which the child learns to deal with emotions, drives and to handle problems in a socially acceptable manner when the family does not help the youngsters to adjust to the environment, they lose effective agent of socialization and hence create stress and anxiety among its members especially the adolescents as in adolescence, the development of independence from the family and adjustment to various social and environmental demands is vital, as the young people have to learn to meet everyday challenges of social relationships, educational attainment and employment (Sud & Sethi, 2008). These novel experiences and demands may evoke anxiety and stress coupled with other emotional reactions.

Though life without stress cannot be imagined and up to a certain limit may be adequate for personality development, but if non-congeniality prevails for a longer period of time these stresses become too severe which may affect the psychic equilibrium producing maladaptive patterns of behaviour (Kundra, 2006).

Anxiety and stress are inevitable during these growing years. Anxiety is described as an unpleasant feeling of fear and apprehension accompanied by increased psychological arousal and stress is defined as the non-specific result of any demand upon the body, be it a mental or somatic demand for survival and the accomplishment of the aims. Stress and anxiety are the offshoots of inadequate interaction with the environment and family environment is the chief cause (Joshi & Tomar, 2006).

Most findings implicate "affectionless control" as the key variable in predicting anxiety disorders (Parker, 1983; Chorpita & Barlow, 1998). Chauhan (2006) in her study revealed that family environment contributed 85% of variance in neuroticism which is all emotionality and anxiety disorders. Jenkins

(1967, 1968, and 1969) found that anxiety run in families i.e. overanxious children due to their genetic make-up tend to have over-neurotic parents and the situation worsens with poor environment which is full of conflicts and turmoils.

The personality characteristic of the individual is also affected by the environmental aspects. Personality predisposes the individuals to maladaptive behaviour and environment precipitates the same. This holds true for adolescents as mood. Fluctuations are common among adolescents because adolescence is a transitional period characterized by various changes which tend to disqualify the young people (Sud and Sethi, 2008). However, the psychological impact of these changes is shaped by the environment in which these changes take place. The family and the various relationship dynamics and interaction patterns therein, serve as a very important context for the psychological development of adolescents at a time when the latter are attempting to discover their personal sense of self and are struggling to establish themselves as independent, self-governing individuals. At the same time, the adolescents' attempts toward individuation may affect parent-child relationship (Sharma, 2009) and unbalance the family environment leading to conflicts thereby thwarting the cohesiveness and organization of the family leading to stress and anxiety (Sharma, 2008).

Method

Design:

A correlational design was used to find out the pattern of relationship between the variables of family environment and different forms of anxiety and stress. Further, regression analysis was computed to predict the most contributing factors. Family environment has been used as independent variable and stress and anxiety as dependent variables.

Sample:

The sample consisted of 200 adolescent students of +2 level (100 male and 100 female) from Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh and was controlled in terms of socio-economic status, educational qualification and age. Sampling technique was purposive and random.

Tools:

Family Environment Scale (Form-R) by Moos & Moos (1986): The scale was used to measure the family climate. It comprises of 10 subscales which assess the three domains or dimensions viz., the relationship dimension, personal-growth dimension and system-maintenance dimension. The relationship dimension is assessed by 3 subscales - cohesion, expressiveness and conflict, the personal-growth dimension is assessed by 5 sub-scales - independence, achievement-orientation and moral-religious emphasis; and the system-maintenance dimension is assessed by 2 Sub-scales - Organization and Control, The scale consists of 90 items i.e. 9 items per each subscale. The scale measures the respondents' perceptions of emphasis placed on different dimensions of family climate. The scoring was done as per directions in the manual. The test-retest reliabilities are all in the acceptable range varying from a low of 0.68 for independence to a high of 0.86 for cohesion.

ICMR Psychological Stress Questionnaire by Srivastava, ICMR Fourth Advisory Committee (1991-1992): This scale was used to assess the extent of the basic components of psychological stress (such as pressure, conflict, tension, anxiety, frustrations, etc.) resulting from perceived stress situation such as adversities, hardships, threats, afflictions, failures, constraints, excessive demands, conflicting roles, etc.) in various spheres of one's social life. This scale consists of two sections. First section consists of 40 items pertaining to psycho-social areas

which cover seven areas: interpersonal relations, excessive liabilities, economic constraints, marriage related problems; health related problems, adverse social situations and perceived imagined threats. The second section of this questionnaire consists of 14 items pertaining to life events stress. The validity and reliability of the scale range from .85 to .95.

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory by Spielberger, Gorsuch and Lushene (1970): This scale was used to assess the state and trait anxiety level of the adolescents. It is comprised of separate self-report scale to measure two distinct anxiety concepts—state anxiety (A-state) and trait anxiety (A-trait). A-state scale is a sensitive indicator of the levels of transitory anxiety experienced by adolescents that occur in various situations. A-state scale consists of 20 statements. The essential qualities evaluated by A-state scale involve feelings of tension, nervousness, worry and apprehension. A-trait scale also consists of 20 statements that ask adolescents how they generally feel. This A-trait scale is a sensitive indicator of the behavioural disposition of anxiety and is characterized by some threat to self-esteem. The reliability coefficient for state anxiety ranges from 0.56 - 0.92 and for trait anxiety it ranges from 0.65 - 0.86. It is a 4-point Likert scale. The range of possible scores varies from 20 to a maximum of 80 for both the types of scale (state and trait).

Results

Table-1 reveals that in females, cohesion ($r=-.21^*$) and expressiveness ($r=-.26^{**}$ $p<.01$) are significantly and negatively related to state anxiety, whereas, conflict ($r=.36^{**}$, $p<.01$) and achievement orientation ($r=.20^*$ $p<.05$) are positively and significantly related to state anxiety. With trait anxiety, conflict ($r=.26^{**}$ $p<.01$) and control ($r=.20^*$ $p<.05$) are positively and significantly correlated and organization

Table 1. Correlation between Anxiety, Stress and Family Environment by Gender

Variables	Females (n=100)				Males (n=100)			
	SA	TA	PSS	LES	SA	TA	PSS	LES
Cohesion	-.21*	-	-	-.52**	-.37**	-	-	-.48**
Expressiveness	-.26**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Conflict	.36**	.26**	.42**	-	-	.24*	.32**	.32**
Independence	-	-	-	-	-	.20*	-	-
Achievement Orientation	.20*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Intellectual Cultural Orientation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Active recreation Orientation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Moral Religious Emphasis	-	-	-.23*	-.30**	-	-	-.23**	-.28
Organization	-	-.28**	-.20*	-	-	-.21*	-.21*	-.23*
Control	-	.20*	.24*	-	-	.25*	-	-

**p<.01 *p<.05

Note: SA = State Anxiety, TA = Trait Anxiety, PSS = Psycho-Social Stress, LES = Life Events Stress.

is negatively and significantly related ($r=-.28^{**}$ $p<.01$). On psycho-social stress, conflict ($r=.42^{**}$ $p<.01$) and control ($r=.24^*$ $p<.05$) are the positive and significant correlates and moral religious emphasis and organization are the negative and significant correlates ($r=-.22^*$ and $-.20^*$ $p<.05$), whereas, on life-events stress, only two factors have been found to be negatively and significantly related viz., cohesion ($r=-.52^{**}$ $p<.01$) and moral-religious emphasis $r=-.30^{**}$ $p<.05$).

In males, state anxiety is negatively and significantly related to cohesion ($r=-.37^{**}$ $p<.01$) and positively and significantly related to conflict ($r=.24^*$ $p<.05$) and independence

($r=.20^*$ $p<.05$), whereas, trait anxiety is positively and significantly correlated to conflict ($r=.32^{**}$ $p<.01$) and control ($r=.25^*$ $p<.05$) and negatively and significantly related to organization ($r=-.21^*$ $p<.05$). Further, in males sample, on stress i.e. psycho-social stress, conflict ($r=.32^{**}$ $p<.01$) is the significant positive correlate, and moral-religious emphasis ($r=-.28^{**}$ $p<.01$) and organization ($r=-.21^{**}$ $p<.01$) are the significant positive correlates. Whereas, in life-events stress, cohesion ($r=-.48^{**}$ $p<.01$), moral-religious emphasis ($r=.25^*$ $p<.05$) and organization ($r=-.23^*$ $p<.05$) are the main significant negative correlates (For details see Table -1).

Table 2. Step-wise Regression Analysis: Predictors of Anxiety in Females (N=100)

State Anxiety							
Variables	b	R	R ²	R ² Change	T	F	
Conflict	.36**	.36	.36	.13	.13	6.23**	38.81**
Expressiveness	-.26**	-.23	-.47	.22	.09	3.20**	10.24**
Cohesion	-.21*	-.18	-.53	.28	.06	2.19*	4.79*
Achievement Orientation	.20*	.15	.57	.32	.04	2.06*	4.24*
Trait Anxiety							
Variables	r	b	R	R ²	R ² Change	T	F
Organization	-.28**	-.28	-.28	.08	.08	3.58**	12.82**
Conflict	.26**	.21	.39	.15	.07	2.74**	7.51**
Control	.20*	.17	.45	.20	.05	2.03	4.12*

**p<.01 *p<.05

Regression analysis (Table 2) reveals that in females sample among the predictors of state anxiety conflict has explained the highest variance of 13% (+) followed by expressiveness contributing 9% (-), cohesion 6% (-) and achievement orientation 4% (+) of variance. On the whole these variables have accounted for 32% of variance whereas, in trait anxiety, organization has contributed the maximum variance of 8% (-) followed by conflict of 7% (+) and control 5% (+) respectively. Overall, these variables have contributed 20% of variance. The results have revealed the commonness of conflict variable in both types of anxiety.

In psycho-social stress, conflict has turned out to be the best predictor showing 18% (+) of variance followed by moral religious emphasis contributing 13% (-) of variance, control 10% (+) of variance and organization 7% (-) of variance. On the whole,

these variables, have accounted for 48% of variance. Whereas, in life-events stress, cohesion has explained the maximum variance of 27% (-) followed by moral-religious emphasis contributing 9% (-) of variance. Together these predictors have accounted for 36% of variance (For details see Table 3). The results have also revealed the commonness of organization in buffering the both types of stress.

In males sample, regression analysis (Table 4) reveals that cohesion is the best and highest significant predictor of state anxiety showing 14% (-) of variance, conflict has shown 11% (+) of variance and independence has explained 6% (+) of variance. In totality, these variables, have accounted for 31% of variance. Whereas, in trait anxiety, conflict has turned out to be the highest significant predictor by explaining 10% (+) of variance followed by control contributing 8% (+) of

Table 3. Step-wise Regression Analysis: Predictors of Stress in Females (N=100)

Psycho-Social Stress							
Variables	R	β	R	R ²	R ² Change	T	F
Conflict	.42**	.42	.42	.18	.18	6.58**	43.29**
Moral Religious Emphasis	-.23*	-.31	-.56	.31	.13	3.13**	9.79**
Control	.24*	.23	.64	.41	.10	2.37*	5.62*
Organization	-.20*	.17	.69	.48	.07	2.09*	4.37*
Life Events Stress							
Variables	r	β	R	R ²	R ² Change	T	F
Cohesion	-.52**	-.52	-.52	.27	.27	8.56**	73.27**
Moral Religious Emphasis	-.30**	-.42	-.60	.36	.09	7.23**	52.27**

**p<.01 *p<.05

Table 4. Step-wise Regression Analysis: Predictors of State Anxiety and Trait Anxiety in Males (N=100)

State Anxiety							
Variables	r	β	R	R ²	R ² Change	T	F
Cohesion	-.37**	-.37	-.37	.14	.14	6.73**	45.29**
Conflict	.24*	.25	.50	.25	.11	3.21**	10.30**
Independence	.20*	.19	.56	.31	.06	2.76**	7.62**
Trait Anxiety							
Variables	r	β	R	R ²	R ² Change	T	F
Conflict	.32**	.35	.32	.10	.10	5.79**	33.52**
Control	.25*	.27	.43	.18	.08	3.42**	11.69**
Organization	-.21*	-.21	-.48	.23	.05	2.17	4.71*

**p<.01 *p<.05

Table 5. Step-wise Regression Analysis: Predictors of Stress in males (N=100)

Psychological Stress							
Variables	r	β	R	R ²	R ² Change	T	F
Conflict	.32**	.32	.32	.10	.10	6.43**	41.34**
Moral Religious Emphasis	-.23**	-.27	-.41	.17	.07	4.79**	22.94**
Organization	-.21*	-.22	-.46	.21	.04	3.21**	10.30**
Life Events-Stress							
Variables	r	β	R	R ²	R ² Change	T	F
Cohesion	-.48**	-.48	-.48	.23	.23	7.53*	56.70**
Moral Religious Emphasis	-.28**	-.39	-.56	.31	.08	5.68**	32.26**
Organization	-.23*	-.31	-.60	.36	.05	3.05**	9.30**

**p<.01 *p<.05

variance and organization showing 5% (-) of variance. On the whole these variables have contributed significantly 23% of variance. Thus, the contribution of family environment ranges from 23% to 31% from trait anxiety to state anxiety (For details see Table 4). The results further reveal the commonness of conflict predicting both the types of anxiety.

On psycho-social stress, conflict has turned out to be the biggest predictor contributing 10% of variance, followed by moral-religious emphasis contributing 7% of variance and organization 4% of variance. In totality these variables have explained 21% of variance. Whereas, in life-events stress, cohesion has explained the maximum variance of 23%, moral-religious emphasis, the second best predictor is contributing 8% of variance and then the organization explaining 5% of variance. On the whole, these variables have accounted for 36% of variance. In both the types of stress, moral religious emphasis and organization have turned out to be the common predictors. Overall, the results emphasize the dominance of cohesion and conflict in predicting the maximum level of stress and anxiety (For details see Table 5).

Discussion

At the very outset, the results prove the importance of family environment in predicting the stress and anxiety in the adolescents. Out of all the variables of family environment,

conflict has turned out to be the most significant and common predictor of anxiety and stress in both the samples viz., males and females sample followed by cohesion. This suggests that conflict in the family may make adolescents vulnerable towards diffusion, directionless and aimlessness. Frequent emotional outbursts lead to bitter family relationships due to approach-avoidance conflicts leading to double bind affect hence giving rise to the feelings of insecurity and identity crisis (Campbell Adams & Dobson, 1984; Nelson Hughes, Handal, Katz & Searight, 1993; Sharma, 2009). Females become the chief targets of conflicts because of their weaker sex, and undefined and multiple roles (Sharma et al., 2008) as compared to males as in females sample. Conflict has shared 20% of variance in anxiety (state 13% and trait 7%). 18% of variance in stress, whereas, in males sample conflict has shown 19% of variance in anxiety (state 11% and trait 8%) and 10% of variance in stress. This reveals that Indian girls have many of their key relationships within the family, and the role of family as a socializing agent is little extended for the Indian girls than for boys who may turn towards other agents also e.g. the peer group. Catalano, Morrison, Wells, Gillimore, Iritani and Hawkins (1992) also suggest that family conflict may lead to alienation between parents and adolescents, which increases their stress and anxiety and in-turn often manifests itself in risky behaviours

viz., delinquency and drug use. Dhillon and Tung (2004) and Sandhu and Tung (2006) have also reported that family environments marked by openly expressed conflicts, anger and aggression hampers the well-being and mental health of the adolescents thereby curbing their achievement of an identity.

Other factors of importance in stress and anxiety of adolescents that have been emerged to be significant predictors are control, cohesion, organization and moral religious emphasis. Equally interesting in adolescents families is the issue of cohesion. Cohesion has been viewed as a positive feature and suggests that cohesiveness and bonding may have progressive effects an adolescent development as cohesive families ensure better psycho-social development in adolescents and that families marked by cohesion and moderate amount of control with moderate independence serve as the right combination for adolescents' growth by reducing their stress and anxiety (Tung & Sandhu, 2008). Families with a high level of cohesion, moderate amount of control are characterized by effective communication, emotional support and efficient cooperation, thus creating an environment in which the adolescents demonstrate the development of general competence and responsibility (Peterson & Leigh, 1990, Arnett, 2001). Similarly, high control in the family marked by rigidly enforced rules and regulations make adjustment to adolescence difficult and thereby making them a frustrating lot by increasing their stress and anxiety (Macoby & Martin, 1983; Lee, Statuto & Kedar-Voivodas, 1983). In female sample control (+) has contributed 5% of variance in anxiety (state) and 10% of variance in stress whereas, in males, control (+) has shown 8% of variance in anxiety (trait) but not with stress. Thus, high levels of adult control when exercised in the families, stress and anxiety are obviously curbing the autonomy and individuality of the adolescents.

Further, the results implicate the importance of moral-religious emphasis and organization as stress busters in the adolescents as both the variables are negatively and significantly correlated to anxiety and stress in both the samples. In females sample, organization has contributed 8% of variance in anxiety (trait) and 7% in stress (psycho-social stress) and moral-religious emphasis shared 22% of variance in stress (13% in psycho-social stress and 9% in life events stress). Whereas, in males sample, organization has accounted for 5% of variance in anxiety (trait) and 9% of variance in stress (4% in psycho-social stress and 5% in life events stress) and moral-religious emphasis has shown 7% - 8% of variance in psycho-social and life events stress. This suggests that families who lay more stress on moral-religious activities are well organized, stable and hence are less vulnerable to stress and anxiety (Sharma et al., 2008) provoking situations that sow the seeds of behavioural and psychological problems.

Another interesting observation of the present study is the emergence of expressiveness and achievement orientation as significant predictors of anxiety (state) only in females' sample which have collectively contributed 13% of variance. This shows that families where females are allowed to express their feelings, have buffering effect on stress and anxiety leading to emotional catharsis as there exists a negative correlation between expressiveness and anxiety. The buffering role played by expressiveness is well worth attention, otherwise, high conflict and lack of cohesion would have taken a heavy toll (Sharma, 2009). Whereas, achievement orientation is positively related to anxiety which suggests that achievement oriented females are ambitious and hence anxious. The expression of anxiety is discharged high ambition. This reveals that for any kind of achievement arousal is required leading to activation. This further reveals that to go

forward, anxiety gives an edge and person starts moving in the direction of achievement. It reflects that moderate amount of anxiety is required to get the optimal performance as anxiety is emotionally determined and stress is cognitively determined. It seems that the expression of stress has been released into anxiety and is considered as a general factor in motivation or striving and is automatic drive (Kumar, 1974).

Overall, the family environment has contributed 52% of variance in anxiety of females (32% in state and 20% in trait) and 54% of variance in males anxiety (state 31% and trait 23%). In stress, family environment has shown 84% of variance in females sample (48% in psycho-social and 36% in life events stress) and 57% in males sample (21% in psycho-social and 36% in life events stress).

To conclude, family environment and presenting styles certainly play a very significant role in the psycho-social development of the adolescents. Family socialization experiences may either hinder or enhance the adolescents' ability to cope with the developmental tasks of adolescence and stress and anxiety as adolescence is the most sensitive period marked by emotional upheavals (Jersild, 1957), hence, there is a dire need for healthy and supportive family environment to make the adolescents competent, resilient and mentally healthy.

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