

## **CONTRIBUTIONS OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND IDENTITY FORMATION TOWARDS ADOLESCENTS' ALIENATION<sup>#</sup>**

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*The present study was an attempt to understand the contribution of family environment and identity formation towards adolescents' alienation. A sample of 200 adolescents (100 boys and 100 girls) in age range 18-21 years, were administered the General Alienation Scale (Ray, 1982), Indian adapted version of Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status-2 (Sandhu & Tung, 2003) which was originally developed by Bennion and Adams (1986), and Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1986). Results of step-wise Multiple Regression Analysis revealed that, for both genders, greater identity achievement, and foreclosure were significant contributors towards lesser alienation. Greater moratorium and diffusion may increase alienation in both genders. Within the family environment, excessive conflict may increase alienation, whereas higher cohesion, and control are significant contributors towards lesser alienation for both genders. Greater expressiveness, and intellectual cultural orientation in the family reduces vulnerability towards alienation in girls, and greater achievement orientation in the family contributes towards lesser alienation in boys. Overall, boys scored significantly more than girls on alienation. All the family environment dimensions have strong correlations with identity achievement and diffusion.*

Despite tremendous progress in every endeavour of mankind, human societies today are at crossroads. The tendency of human beings towards deviance is present at all developmental stages, yet adolescence is the most vulnerable, and sensitive period for an individual to adopt a negative identity and dysfunction. During adolescence, the individual struggles to conceptualize himself, which allows him to be a part of the adult world, and an inability to know and define oneself may be accompanied by feelings of aimlessness, fragmentation, or alienation (Erikson, 1968).

Alienation, frequently characterized by feelings of normlessness, guidelessness, powerlessness, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment or cynicism (Olsen, 1969) can be considered to be a malaise of modern

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times. Adolescents are the most frequent victims of the feelings of alienation, although there are no exact statistics because the concept of alienation is a very general, and abstract one. Also, it is not a defined mental disorder as such. Alienation is highly distressing when the individual feels emotionally disconnect from all reference groups. Such an individual is lonely, and lost-a complete outsider. Alienation can often lead adolescents to commit crimes, and a climate of alienation can trigger violence, and unrest among the youth. Alienated youth are often attracted towards cults, or other subgroups, which mislead them from the mainstream.

Alienation, the feeling of being a stranger or not belonging to the community, results from an inability to express one's self honestly. Alienation, often involved with adolescents quest for identity commonly involves a distrust of adults, a rejection of their values, and a pessimistic worldview. Erikson (1968) has characterized identity diffusion by feelings of aimlessness and alienation.

Identity refers to a person's stable, coherent, and integrated sense of self, that is who one is, and what one stands for as a member of society. Identity formation is a process unique to an individual, and can be characterized in terms of four statuses namely identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion, along the dimensions of exploration and commitment (Marcia, 1966). Identity achievement represents an autonomous resolution of identity after a period of exploration. The person in moratorium is intensely preoccupied with exploring options, and working with commitment. People who follow the foreclosure pattern, adopt a single set of values and goals, usually of their parents. Those in diffusion status, are neither committed to life tasks, nor are engaged in exploration. They tend to follow the path of least resistance, and may present as having a carefree, cosmopolitan lifestyle, or as being empty or dissatisfied.

Achieving a healthy identity engenders positive psychosocial outcomes, whereas the lack of identity is expressed as being hostile towards the roles offered as proper, and desirable by one's family or immediate community. Such individuals do not have any awareness of the direction and purpose of life. Without this awareness, the adolescent retains a sense of isolation, and personal alienation, stemming from his failure to establish a role in society (Adams, Gullotta, & Markstrom-Adams, 1994). Cramer (2000) has also reported that alienation from others, is negatively related to identity achievement in adolescent boys and girls. Adolescent girls high on foreclosure report less alienation, whereas alienation has positive correlations with diffusion in girls. Research has also suggested that

alienation precedes cult membership, and cults seem to offer confused, and isolated adolescents a moratorium—a period of dropping out, or ‘time-out’ as well as a highly structured sense of belonging, and a means of escape from being ‘normless’ (Rudin, 1990).

Assessment of possible sources suggests that family environment is a crucial factor in the psychosocial development of an individual. The adolescents need authentic, stabilizing standards upon which they can depend and trust, so as to construct their lives meaningfully. Family experiences right from childhood may contribute to a sense of alienation. If the parents are authoritarian, over-controlling, and emotionally too distant, the child finds it difficult to identify with the family, and to develop a sense of real belongingness. In psychoanalytic terms, such a child does not develop a traditional super ego that reflects the standards and values of the family. In adolescence and adulthood, it can be expected that such individuals find it difficult to form close ties with others.

Similarly, the roots of one’s identity can be traced back to the familial patterns experienced by a child in her or his early days. Inappropriate environments create unresolved conflicts, which hamper identity consolidation in adolescence, as it demands a reintegration of previous roles into a stable identity (Erikson, 1968). Hunter (1998) has suggested that adolescents seek self identity, and search for models and ideals found within their environment, however paradoxical standards, conflicts, and confusions may retreat them into isolation and rebellion. Kamptner (1988) has reported that security in family relations enhance adolescents social confidence, and degree of interpersonal affiliation, which directly or indirectly enhances identity formation. On the other hand, disruptions in family dynamics may lead to adolescents’ defiance, and loss of cohesiveness. Weakened family bonds create alienation between parents and children (Kandel, 1982). Bhattacharya (1998) suggests that alienation between parents and children lead to delinquency, drug use, and further alienation. Researchers have also pointed out that positive family environment is associated with better psychosocial functioning of adolescents, while conflictual family environments support negative outcomes (Lopez, Watkins, Manus, & Hunton-Shoup, 1992; Sandhu & Tung, 2003).

Keeping in mind the importance of the family environment, the present study was designed to study the relationship of family environment with the different identity statuses, and how they together contribute towards the disillusionment, meaninglessness, and dissatisfaction among adolescent boys and girls.



## METHOD

### Sample

The sample comprised of 200 adolescents (100 boys and 100 girls) ranging in age from 18 to 21 years with a mean age of 19.12 years for boys, and 19.23 years for girls. A random sample representing all colleges of Amritsar city, of Punjab State of North India, was selected, and participants were more or less similar with regard to socioeconomic, cultural background, and academic milieu.

### Instruments

Following instruments were used to achieve the objectives of the present study.

#### *General Alienation Scale*

General Alienation Scale (GAS) as developed by Ray (1982) measures overall alienation (alienation as a whole), rather than measuring some subcategory of alienation. The scale is in English language and the 20 items of the scale cover six subcategories of alienation suggested by Olsen (1969), namely normlessness or guidelessness, powerlessness, meaninglessness, dissimilarity or isolation, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment or cynicism. The response options for each item are: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree. For the reverse items, these responses are scored as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively; and for straight items it is scored as 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. The scale's score is the sum of the item scores. The test-retest reliability over a 15 days period ( $N=50$ ) was found to range from 0.78 to 0.84. The test has been found appropriate for use with Indian adolescents in a pilot study conducted by the researcher of the present study.

#### *Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status-2*

Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status-2 (EOMEIS-2) is originally developed by Bennion and Adams (1986), was adapted and standardized for Indian adolescents by Sandhu and Tung (2003). The language of the scale is English and it measures identity formation on two domains, i.e., ideological (which includes areas like occupation, religion, politics, and philosophical life style) and interpersonal (which covers areas like friendship, recreation, dating, and sex roles). Only the areas of friendship and recreation were studied in interpersonal domain. The other two areas were not studied because of their inappropriateness for Indian adolescents. Thus, out of total 64 items, 48 were used in the present study. Participants have to

respond to each item on any one of 6 response options ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Items are scored by weighing the “strongly agree” response with value of six and “strongly disagree” with a value of one. The items are identified under the appropriate identity status and the summated scores for four statuses (identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, diffusion) are calculated for both domains. In the present study, the scores on both the domains were added to yield total identity scores on four statuses, for each participant. Test-retest reliability ( $N=50$ ) over a 15 days period of time, ranged from 0.73 to 0.91.

### *Family Environment Scale*

Family Environment Scale (FES) originally developed by Moos and Moos (1986) was adapted for Indian context by Chahal (as cited in Tung, 2003). It comprises of 10 subscales, and the total number of item is 90, that measure the social environmental characteristics of all types of families. The 10 subscales are: Cohesion, Expressiveness, Conflict, Independence, Achievement Orientation, Intellectual Cultural Orientation, Active Recreational Orientation, Moral Religious Emphasis, Organization, and Control. The language of the scale is English and scoring is done by using the scoring template provided with the full scale. The crosses visible under windows are counted, and are entered at the bottom, for each subscale. Test-retest reliability ( $N = 50$ ) over a 15 days period of time, for different subscales was found to range from 0.72 to 0.78.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

*t*-test was used to study the significance of difference between mean scores of alienation of boys and girls. To study the relationship of alienation, identity statuses, and family environment, all variables were correlated by applying appropriate correlational analysis techniques and were further subjected to step wise Multiple Regression Analysis.

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and t-test of Boys and Girls on GAS (N = 200)*

GAS	Boys ( $n=100$ )		Girls ( $n=100$ )		<i>t</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
Alienation	60.82	22.75	51.16	19.95	3.19**

\*\* $p < .01$

*t*-test analysis reveals that boys score significantly higher on alienation than girls as suggested by Table 1. Results show that alienation is more in boys as compared to girls. So, boys are more vulnerable to go away from the mainstream as compared to girls. Lesser alienation in girls as compared to boys has also been reported by Tani, Chavez, and Deffenbacher (2001).

The correlations between different identity statuses as measured through Extended Objective Measure of Ego-identity Status-2, dimensions of Family Environment Scale, and General Alienation Scale are shown in Table 2 for boys and in Table 3 for girls.

Table 2

*Correlations of Dimensions of FES and EOMEIS-2 with GAS for Boys Sample (N = 100)*

FES	EOMEIS-2				GAS Alienation
	Achievement	Moratorium	Diffusion	Foreclosure	
Cohesion	.77**	.24*	-.88**	.07	-.88**
Expressiveness	.87**	.40**	-.85**	-.35**	-.71**
Conflict	-.65**	.15	.64**	-.25*	.86**
Independence	.84**	.43**	-.81**	-.39**	-.65**
Achievement Orientation	.83**	.45**	-.82**	-.38**	-.67**
Intellectual Cultural Orientation	.83**	.39**	-.84**	-.28*	-.72**
Active Recreational Orientation	.81**	.45**	-.83**	-.30*	-.67**
Moral Religious Emphasis	.81**	.43**	-.83**	-.31**	-.67**
Organization	.81**	.40**	-.85**	-.27*	-.74**
Control	.76**	.11	-.81**	.09	-.89**
Alienation	-.77**	-.06	.81**	-.15	-

\**p*<.05; \*\**p*<.01

Table 3

*Correlations of Dimensions of FES and EOMEIS-2 with GAS for Girls Sample (N = 100)*

FES	EOMEIS-2			GAS	
	Achievement	Moratorium	Diffusion	Foreclosure	Alienation
Cohesion	.72**	-.01	-.75**	-.10	-.84**
Expressiveness	.84**	.25*	-.65**	-.54**	-.66**
Conflict	-.50**	.49**	.49**	-.32**	.85**
Independence	.83**	.28*	-.67**	-.53**	-.64**
Achievement Orientation	.85**	.22	-.58**	-.55**	-.62**
Intellectual Cultural Orientation	.86**	.24*	-.59**	-.60**	-.59**
Active Recreational Orientation	.85**	.10	-.55**	-.48**	-.64**
Moral Religious Emphasis	.86**	.17	-.63**	-.53**	-.65**
Organization	.87**	.19	-.62**	-.56**	-.65**
Control	.67**	.01	-.78**	-.03	-.84**
Alienation	-.72**	.24*	.70**	-.07	-

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

As revealed by Table 2 and 3, alienation in both adolescent boys and girls is significantly inversely correlated with identity achievement, and significantly positively correlated with diffusion. Individuals scoring high on alienation seemingly are higher on diffusion and individuals scoring low on alienation seem to be high on identity achievement status. Commitment to life tasks after exploration (i.e. identity achievement) does not support alienation, while alienation in adolescents goes hand in hand with identity status in which individuals are neither committed to various life tasks, nor are concerned to make such commitments.

Table 3 suggests that in adolescent girls, moratorium status is positively correlated with alienation. Thus, higher identity exploration in women also accompanies higher alienation.

Also, for both genders, alienation, as well as identity diffusion are significantly inversely correlated with all the dimensions of FES,

except conflict, with which they have significant positive correlations. This pattern of correlations is exactly opposite to that of identity achievement with alienation and FES dimensions. From the correlational analysis, it is revealed that individuals scoring high on alienation perceive their family environment as low on cohesion, whereas family members are given limited autonomy to express themselves and to take their decisions. The lesser stress is laid upon participating and excelling in various activities outside the realm of work and education. Also, there is little emphasis on ethical issues, and there is lesser organization and control in the family, but there is more of openly expressed anger, aggression and conflict in the family. Similar kind of family environment has been reported by adolescents scoring high on diffusion status.

On the other hand, adolescents scoring low on alienation seemingly have an enriched, warm, supportive, stimulating, democratic, and disciplined, family environment. These individuals also perceive lesser conflict in their families. Similar correlational patterns between identity achievement status and family environment have come out. These kinds of correlational patterns between family environment, and identity, achievement have been reported by Sandhu and Tung (2003), and Willemssen and Waterman (1991).

The results further show that boys and girls placed high on moratorium status, perceive their family environment as encouraging independence, expressiveness, and motivating them to be participative in various activities. However, girls high on moratorium report higher aggression in their families. Whereas, boys reporting high on moratorium perceive their family members as cohesive, achievement oriented, organized, recreation oriented, and stressing upon ethical-moral issues.

A step-wise Multiple Regression Analysis was performed to determine the amount of variance in the dependent variable (alienation) that could be accounted for, by the different independent variables (identity statuses and family environment) and the impact of each independent variable in the prediction of the dependent variable. Results of regression analysis reveal that for boys and girls sample, 91% and 92% of the variance is explained by the selected variables, respectively. In order to delineate the variable significantly contributing towards the dependent variable, *F*-ratios were calculated and the level of significance was checked. The results of regression analysis and *F*-ratios are also given in Table 4 and 5 for boys and girls, respectively.



Table 4

*Regression Coefficients and F-ratios of Boys Sample (N = 100)*

	Variables added	R.C.	R <sup>2</sup>	F
1.	Control	-2.20	0.80	400**
2.	Cohesion	-2.07	0.84	20**
3.	Conflict	1.76	0.86	20**
4.	Diffusion	0.35	0.87	10**
5.	Identity achievement	-0.12	0.88	10**
6.	Organization	-0.34	0.88	0
7.	Intellectual Cultural Orientation	-0.35	0.88	0
8.	Expressiveness	0.64	0.88	0
9.	Moral Religious Emphasis	0.70	0.88	0
10.	Active Recreational Orientation	0.71	0.88	0
11.	Achievement Orientation	-2.20	0.89	10**
12.	Independence	-0.07	0.89	0
13.	Foreclosure	-0.27	0.90	10**
14.	Moratorium	0.24	0.91	10**

\*\**p*<.01

Table 4 suggests that variables contributing positively towards alienation of boys are conflict, identity diffusion, and moratorium, while those contributing negatively are control, cohesion, achievement orientation, identity achievement, and foreclosure.

Table 5

*Regression Coefficients and F-ratio of Girls Sample (N = 100)*

	Variables added	R.C.	R <sup>2</sup>	F
1.	Conflict	1.61	0.72	240**
2.	Control	-0.90	0.84	60**
3.	Cohesion	-0.21	0.86	20**
4.	Identity Achievement	-0.23	0.87	10**
5.	Diffusion	0.35	0.88	10**
6.	Expressiveness	-2.06	0.89	10**
7.	Moral Religious Emphasis	0.31	0.89	0
8.	Organization	-0.62	0.89	0
9.	Active Recreational Orientation	-0.44	0.89	0
10.	Independence	-0.32	0.89	0
11.	Achievement Orientation	-0.29	0.89	0
12.	Intellectual Cultural Orientation	-0.01	0.90	10**
13.	Moratorium	0.29	0.91	10**
14.	Foreclosure	-0.38	0.92	11.11**

\*\**p*<0.01

Table 5 shows that variables contributing positively towards alienation of girls are conflict, identity diffusion, and moratorium. While those contributing negatively are control, cohesion, expressiveness, intellectual cultural orientation, identity achievement, and foreclosure.

As evident from the results, family environment marked by openly expressed anger, and aggression among family members makes adolescents boys and girls more vulnerable to alienation. Frequent emotional outbursts lead to bitter family relationships, feelings of insecurity, and unavailability for the family members in the adolescents' minds. Adolescents from conflictual families slowly withdraw themselves from such atmosphere. From the behavioural viewpoint, it is possible to argue that the kinds of withdrawal associated with alienation may be reinforcing to the individual, having their own psychological payoffs. Thus a vicious circle might form that strengthens the sense of alienation. Catalano et al., (1992) suggest that family conflict and communication deficits may lead to alienation between parents and children, which in turn often manifest itself in delinquency and drug use. However, familial conflict may have a greater impact on girls than boys as explained by the large percentage of variance. 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 girls, than for boys, who may turn towards other agents also, for example the peer group. Thus, the emotional environment within the family may have a larger bearing upon the psychosocial development of girls.

On the other hand, if the family members help, support, and cooperate with each other, emotional intimacy and positive interpersonal relationships develop. Cohesive family environment provides a 'dependable home base' and insulation to adolescent boys and girls, whenever they are passing through tumultuous periods. Cohesiveness in the family binds all members in a common thread, and reduces the adolescents' risk to be alienated or estranged. Kandel (1982) reports that loss of family cohesiveness, and in turn, lack of communication creates further alienation between parents and children.

Also, family system characterized by control maintains discipline in the family and reduces the vulnerability of adolescent boys and girls to deviate from the mainstream, as certain authority always keeps their activities in-check. Control may also be perceived by adolescents as a sort of security and protectiveness in cultures where it is a prescribed norm, as suggested by Tung (2003) and Graf (2003).

However, control plays a more important role in boys' alienation as compared to girls. In Indian culture, girls are usually reared in family environments where control is subtle, and understated, yet understood and implied. Also, the acceptability of rules is higher in girls than in boys. Adolescent boys possibly of their increased autonomy, and inclination towards peer group, have to be constantly reminded of rules and regulations in overtones.

The results also suggest that when adolescent girls are provided with enough autonomy to speak up their point of view, and to express themselves, their likelihood of getting alienated decreases. Probably, giving a vent to one's pent up emotions and communicating with others sorts out many problems of adolescent girls, thereby warding off the feelings of loneliness, and estrangement. Also, the collective participation of family members in various intellectual cultural activities develops a spirit of togetherness in the family, and reduces the distance between family members.

For adolescent boys, a family, which is achievement oriented, and where members encourage each other to be competitive, decreases the tendency to be alienated. An environment which motivates individuals to excel in their activities keeps adolescent boys focused on their aims, rather than being sidetracked from the community.

The results show that identity formation process plays an important role in the alienation of adolescent boys and girls. Identity achievement contributes negatively to alienation of adolescent boys and girls. A lack of firm and healthy identity exposes individuals to various maladaptive patterns. Identity achieved individuals firmly know themselves, and how they stand relative to others, thus it reduces the chances of alienation. Without this awareness, however, the adolescent retains a sense of isolation and personal alienation, stemming from his failure to establish a role in society (Adams et al., 1994). Also Glover (1996) suggests that as issues of social role and purpose become better defined, and resolved for older individuals, the sense of alienation may dissipate.

Similarly, foreclosed adolescents have commitments to life tasks, although they are designed by parents. Foreclosed individuals derive security, and comfort gratification by being an extension of their parents. They always seek parental approval because of their deep rooted loyalties to them, and continue revolving in orbits around their parents. Thus, alienation feelings can not disturb them.

However, the individuals, in moratorium status are currently exploring different pathways, and are going through a period of turmoil and confusion. Alienated lifestyle may sometimes be a deliberate identity choice, because of the realization of paradoxical and antagonistic life aspects. Thus, the exploration process may create feelings of distance between them and others, which slowly generalizes to the social world. Also, the research suggests that adolescents having encountered frustrations and confusions may retreat into isolation and may join various youth movements or cults, which slowly cause estrangement from family.

The diffused adolescents neither have any commitments, nor are keen to know, and define themselves as individuals. They can be characterized as from being 'happy-go-lucky' drifters to those with severe psychopathology. They are usually empty/shallow personalities who enjoy a meaningless life, and are most vulnerable to indices of maladjustment. As a way of shielding themselves from rejection and psychological injury, they play the psychological game of rejecting others, before they reject them. The entire process leads to further withdrawal and alienation.

Conclusively, boys have been found to be higher on alienation and it can be said that family environment and identity formation process play a significant role in adolescent boys and girls alienation. A warm, congenial, disciplined, and supportive family environment helps adolescents overcome the stress, and storm attached with adolescent years, whereas conflictual family environment hampers the psychosocial development of adolescent boys and girls. Thus, families should assist adolescents in the discovery of their 'selves', so that the road to their future remains clear to them, and they realize the relevance of social world in their lives. Such issues if stressed upon, may save many vulnerable souls to fall a trap to various cults, and subcultures, who aim destruction and devastation of youth, and society as a whole. Also, the adolescents can be prevented from treading on the path of violence, and antisocial behavior, with the timely intervention of family.

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