

SELF-ESTEEM OF ADOLESCENTS: A COMPARISON OF MONOGAMOUS AND POLYGAMOUS FAMILIES[#]

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The present study was carried out to investigate whether self-esteem of adolescents in N.W.F.P. (Pakistan) varies directly with perceived maternal acceptance-rejection. It was assumed that significant mean differences in Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (Haque, 1981) as well as Self-esteem Questionnaire (Rohner, Saaverda, & Granum, 1980) scores will be found between adolescents recalling their step-mothers as being low warm (high scorers) as compared to adolescents recalling their mothers being high warm (low scorers). The sample consisted of 100 adolescents including an equal number of boys and girls from monogamous (both-parent) families and polygamous (step-parent) families. Significant differences in attitude of mothers and step-mothers were found. Compared to polygamous families, subjects in monogamous families have high self-esteem.

Several studies show that child-rearing practices, socialization techniques, interpersonal family relations and attitudes, parental acceptance-rejection, and child's perception of parental behavior exert significant influences on psychological development of the child. However, of all these factors, parental acceptance-rejection has been explored.

Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory (PART) is a socialization theory introduced by Rohner's (1975). The theory postulates that parental love, warmth, and affection is positively related to normal personality development of the child. Children who are rejected by their parents tend to be anxious, hostile, aggressive, and emotionally unstable and have low self-esteem (Rohner, Saaverda, & Granum, 1980). Rejection of a child by parents may foster a distorted and devaluated self-concept and self-image for the youngsters. The child may feel helpless, inferior, and insecure in his interpersonal relations (Anthony, 1970; Biller & Davids, 1973). Kawash, Kerr, and Clewes, (1985) found that self-esteem is related to perceived parental rejection. Contrary to these findings, several studies show that children who come from warm

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and loving families are more securely attached (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978); and have higher self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967). The bulk of research evidence supports the hypothesis of perceived parental attitude, especially of mother, as an important antecedent of one's self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967; Victor & Michael, 1985).

Parent-child relationship is determined by several factors including the marital relationship of parents. Increased parents-child involvement and sensitive, competent, affectionate parent-child relationships have been found when spouses are mutually supportive (Cowan, Cowan, Heming, & Miller, 1981; Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989). Any disturbance, damage, or break in this relationship would have deleterious effects on both parents and children (Dix, 1981).

One of the significant factors that severely disturbs mutual relationship of parents and children is the second marriage of the father. It is generally reported that the rate of polygamy is very high in North West Frontier Province (N.W.F.P.) of Pakistan as compared to other parts of the country. Usually the conditions preceding and succeeding second or later marriages are adverse in nature and lead to a host of unpleasant experiences. Consequently, composition of family is either broken or seriously disturbed. Family problems usually reach a crisis. The mainspring of most of the conflicts in a polygamous family is the negative and biased interaction between the two or more wives which is expected to exercise significant influences on psychological development of the children. Due to emotional instability, the neglected or rejected individual becomes anxious, hostile, insecure, and his/her feelings of self-worth or devalued. According to Rogers (1961) a person's view of his/her own worth or self-esteem is largely determined by an unconditional positive regard, i.e., a general acceptance and appreciation of oneself from those who are most important to him/her.

Keeping in view the unpleasant consequences of second marriage of husband for psychological well-being of wife and the importance of step-mother's attitude for psychological development of children, the present study was designed to explore if any significant differences exist in self-esteem of adolescent in monogamous and polygamous families.

The step-family has probably been in existence for as long as any other type of family unit, yet even today our society's attitude towards it remains inconsistent and ambivalent. The literature on step-families is packed with extensive accounts of the almost universal wicked step-

mother mythology. Such negative images of the step-mother and its influence have undoubtedly contributed to what Bernard (1971) describes as the popular beliefs that step-children are damaged in personality, have reduced chances of success in marriage and are liable to delinquency.

In view of the research evidence derived from empirical investigations of folklore image of the step-mother and a relatively higher rate of polygamy in our society, the researcher undertook to investigate if presence of step-mother in the family besides the biological mother, exercises any negative influence on they youngsters.

The main objective of the present investigation was to study parent-child relationship in step-parent families and its impact on self-esteem of children. It was hypothesized that significant mean differences in PARQ as well as Self-esteem Questionnaire scores will emerge between adolescents recalling their mothers/step-mothers as being low warm (high scorers) as compared to the adolescents recalling their mothers/step-mothers being warm (low scorers).

METHOD

Sample

The sample was randomly drawn from middle class families living in Peshawar with children ranging in age from 14 to 16 years. It consisted of 100 adolescents including an equal number of boys and girls from monogamous (both-parents) and polygamous (step-parent) families. Only one adolescent (male/female) was selected from each family. Mothers of the subjects had a minimum qualification of matric and fathers are government servants (BPS 16-18).

Instruments

Urdu versions (Haque, 1981; Riaz, 1993) of the two self-report Questionnaires, the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ), and the Self-esteem Questionnaire developed by Rohner, Saaverda, and Granum (1980) were used. Both of these questionnaires were translated into Urdu using back translation technique.

Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ)

PARQ was devised to elicit respondents' assessments of their childhood experiences in terms of perceived parental warmth (i.e., acceptance-rejection), when they were between 7 and 12 years of age. It

consists of 60 items comprising four subscales: Warmth/Affection (20 items; e.g., My mother says nice things about me); Hostility/Aggression (15 items; e.g., My mother treats me harshly); Neglect/Indifference (15 items; e.g., My mother totally ignores me); and Rejection/Undifferentiated (10 items; e.g., My mother views me as a burden).

Self-esteem Questionnaire

Self-esteem Questionnaire consists of 9 items. Rohner (1980) defined self-esteem as an internal perceptive of personality, and emotional evaluation of oneself in terms of worth. Positive feelings of self-esteem employ that one likes oneself, accepts oneself, and perceives oneself as a person worthy of respect. A representative item illustrating positive self-esteem is "I feel I am a good person and worthy of the respect of others".

One both the self-report questionnaires, items are scored on a 4-point scale ranging from almost always true to almost never true. To avoid response set bias, some items on each one of the questionnaires are keyed in opposite direction and reversed scored. The reliability and validity of the original English versions of the PARQ and Self-esteem Questionnaires have been reported as adequate for cross-cultural testing (Rohner, 1980). The total PARQ score ranges from 60 (indicating maximum warmth) to 240 (indicating minimum warmth). Similarly, the total score on Self-esteem Questionnaire ranges from 9 (indicating highly positive self-esteem) to 36 (indicating highly negative self-esteem).

Procedure

Each subjects was asked to fill in a personal data sheet, to provide relevant demographic data, i.e., age, family composition (monogamous/polygamous), education of mother/step-mother, socioeconomic status of the family. Based on the information provided matched groups of subjects were selected from monogamous and polygamous families.

Both the questionnaires, viz., PARQ (mothers/step-mother), and Self-esteem Questionnaire were printed in the form of a booklet. Each subject was tested individually. The test was given by a male examiner to boys and a female examiner administered the test to girls.

Each subject was given booklet and asked to fill in the blanks to provide relevant demographic data before answering the questions given in the test booklet. The subject was asked to express his/her

opinion on a 4-point scale ranging between "Almost Always True" to "Almost Never True".

RESULTS

Table 1

Differences between mean scores of adolescents from monogamous (high warmth) and polygamous (low warmth) families on the PARQ and Self-esteem Questionnaire

Variables	Monogamous (n=50)	Polygamous (n=50)	t
Low Warmth	29.62 (1.98)	44.30 (3.95)	6.419*
Aggression	22.54 (2.31)	33.62 (3.38)	6.207*
Neglect	21.22 (2.21)	31.86 (3.08)	7.046*
Undifferentiated Rejection	17.08 (1.81)	24.92 (2.59)	7.431*
Total PARQ Scores	90.54 (3.62)	134.74 (5.80)	8.649*
Self-esteem Questionnaire	10.58 (1.91)	12.74 (1.86)	3.021*

* $p < .01$

Note: High PARQ and Self-esteem mean scale scores indicate low warmth as well as low self-esteem.

: Standard deviations are given in parenthesis.

Results are presented in Tables 1-2. Table 1 shows a comparison between monogamous and polygamous families in terms of maternal attitude towards adolescents. The data clearly show that subjects who come from polygamous families perceive their step-mothers to be significantly less warm, more aggressive, more neglecting, and more rejecting as compared to subjects' evaluations of maternal behaviour in

monogamous families. Further, scores of the former group on Self-esteem Questionnaire are significantly higher than the later group indicating low self-esteem of subjects who were brought up in polygamous families.

Table 2

Correlation between scores of adolescents from monogamous families and polygamous families on each of the PARQ variables (subscales) and Self-esteem Questionnaire

PARQ variables	Self-esteem Questionnaire	
	Monogamous (n=50)	Polygamous (n=50)
Low Warmth	.768*	.400*
Aggression	.482*	.464*
Neglect	.103	.050
Undifferentiated Rejection	.059	.530*
Total PARQ	.536*	.504*

* $p < .001$

Table 2 presents coefficient of correlation between various PARQ subscales and Self-esteem Questionnaire. The results clearly show that perceived maternal warmth and self-esteem are positively correlated.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that adolescents in polygamous families perceive their step-mothers attitude towards them as highly negative and rejecting. These subjects have rated their step-mothers as showing low warmth, and more hostility, neglect, and rejection. Adolescent in monogamous families perceive maternal attitude as more positive, accepting, and warm. The differences between the mean scores of two groups on all the four subscales of PARQ (low warmth, hostility, neglect, and undifferentiated rejection) as well as total PARQ scores are significantly different. The results clearly demonstrate that subjects

perceive attitude of step-mother being highly negative and rejecting. The attitude of members is usually perceived more negatively (Bryan, Coleman, Ganong, & Bryan, 1986). Several studies suggest that step-mothers show more negative attitude towards their step-children (Clingempeel, Brand, & Segal, 1987; Hetherington, 1987). It seems that in step-parent families previously established affectional bonds between children and their mothers interfere with the formation of ties to step-mother. Furthermore, the step-family may be contaminated with anger, guilt, jealousy, value conflicts, misperceptions, and fear (Einstein, 1979).

Further, both these groups of subscale show significant differences in perceived self-esteem. Adolescents who come from monogamous families are significantly higher on perceived self-esteem as compared to those who come from polygamous families. However, it is surprising to note that despite differences between the two groups, self-esteem of both the groups is high. These findings can be explained in the following perspectives: (i) In all the polygamous families included in the present study, both the biological mother and step-mother are living together. The presence of biological mother in the family does mollify, to some extent, the negative impact of the step-mother on children. (ii) These adolescents, before the family composition was disturbed by the step-mother, might have had adequate parental love, warmth, and affection during early formative years and had already developed a positive self-image, self-respect and a high self-esteem. Consequently the negative and rejecting attitude of the step-mother has not severely affected their self-esteem. (iii) Another possible reason may be the fathers in such a family situation are generally more caring and try to compensate consciously or unconsciously, to minimize the ill-effects of their second marriage on children whose love they will never like to lose.

Table 2 shows the coefficients of correlations between four PARQ subscales as well as total PARQ and Self-esteem Questionnaire. The total PARQ and Self-esteem scores show significant positive correlation. An examination of correlations between different subscales of PARQ and Self-esteem Questionnaire shows that in both-parent families, all the correlations are significant except aggression and neglect scales. This result indicates that being warm and less aggressive is related to high self-esteem, whereas the implicit expression of neglect and rejection does not contribute significantly towards evaluation of self-worth. In step-parent families, on the other hand, all the PARQ scales except neglect are significantly correlated with low self-esteem. These findings suggest that explicit expression of negative attitudes has a

negative impact on the children's self-esteem, whereas the implicit feelings of step-parent to neglect the child do not have any significant effect on his/her evaluation of self-worth. The data suggest that demonstration of warmth, hostility, and rejection have significant relationship with self-esteem of adolescents. The results of the present study demonstrate that the negative self-esteem of adolescents in step-families in N.W.F.P. is positively associated with less maternal warmth, whereas the positive self-esteem of adolescents in both-parent families is positively associated with high maternal warmth. On the whole, the results show a positive correlation between subjects' perceived maternal acceptance-rejection and self-esteem. The results of the present study are consistent with cross-cultural studies of Rohner and Rohner (1980) and Saaverda (1980). A holocultural research study using a worldwide sample of 101 societies (Rohner, 1975) demonstrated that rejected children tend to evaluate themselves more negatively than accepted children. These findings confirm our hypothesis that self-esteem of adolescents who come from monogamous families is higher as compared to those who come from polygamous families.

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