Perceived Interparental Relationship and Life Satisfaction among Adolescents: A Review

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews several empirical studies which highlight that life satisfaction among adolescents are strongly influenced by their inter-parental relationship. Inter-parental relationship is indicated as a factor contributing to life satisfaction of adolescents. A strong relationship between life satisfaction and inter-parental relationship has been reported in several past studies. Based on the findings of many studies, there is a significant relationship between positive inter-parental relationships with the increase level of life satisfaction. Thus, this paper aims to review the relationship between inter-parental relationship and life satisfaction among adolescents. This article also aims to highlight the theoretical explanation of relationship between perceived interparental relationship and life satisfaction among adolescents. Review yields valuable information for clinical intervention and further research.

Key Words : Life satisfaction, Perceived interparental relationship, Parents, Adolescents

Perceived interparental relationship refers to children's perceptions regarding the quality of the relationship between their parents. Interparental relationship indicates relationship regarding support, communication, decision making, care and helping each other in various households between father and mother (Tiwari and Verma, 2015). Relationship between parents which has been mostly studied in terms of interparental conflict in Western literature has a significant impact on adolescents' life satisfaction (Chappel, 2011) and mental health problems (Bradford *et al.*, 2008). Life satisfaction is one of the main components of subjective well-being which strongly determined by perceived interparental relationship.

Life satisfaction is the cognitive component of subjective well-being and plays an important role in positive development of adolescents (Park, 2004). Life satisfaction, or perceived quality of life, is one broad construct, which encompasses the full range of functioning from "very low" to "OK" to "very high", and has received increasing attention as an indicator of optimal functioning among youth (Suldo and Huebner, 2006). Life satisfaction

has been defined as a subjective appraisal of the quality of one's life overall or with specific domains (Diener *et al.*, 1999). Research has documented many benefits for individuals with high Life Satisfaction, such as physical health, mental health, good interpersonal relationships, and educational and vocational success (Park, 2004).

Although many studies of life satisfaction of adults have been conducted, life satisfaction in adolescence has only recently become the focus of empirical work. Collectively, demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, SES, race) are relatively weak predictors of adolescents' life satisfaction (Huebner *et al.*, 2000). Several personality variables including locus of control, self-esteem, and extraversion are significantly associated with children's life satisfaction (McCullough *et al.*, 2000). Environmental factors, such as participation in extracurricular activities (Gilman and Huebner, 2006), neighborhood, major life events, and family experiences (Huebner *et al.*, 2004) are all significant predictors of adolescents' life satisfaction. Stronger predictors involve interpersonal relationship variables, such as attachments to parents (Nickerson and Nagle, 2005) parental control (Shek,

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2008) and interparental relationship (Chang *et al.*, 2003), which may serve as possible determinants of individual differences in adolescent life.

Demographics and Life Satisfaction:

Studies have renowned specific relationships between demographic variables and adolescents life satisfaction. Gender particularly seems to be an important correlate since gender differences in well-being begin to increase during adolescence due to psychosocial and biological-hormonal changes (Piko, 2001). In addition, there are gender differences in the risk and protective factor structure of adolescent health behavior, health and well-being (Piko and Fitzpatrick, 2002). Ash and Huebner (2001) found that SES was positively related to life satisfaction (*i.e.* lower SES students reported lower life satisfaction than higher SES students). Huebner *et al.,* 2004) reported a significant difference for race among American students using the Brief Multidimensional Student's Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLSS). Family structure was found to be related with adolescents' life satisfaction (Barger *et al.*, 2009).

Personality and Life Satisfaction:

Findings from correlational research have shown life satisfaction to be positively associated with self-esteem (Aquilino and Supple, 2001), health-related quality of life (Zullig *et al.*, 2005), hope (Gilman *et al.*, 2006), self-efficacy (Bradley and Corwyn, 2004), participation in structured extracurricular activities (SEAs) (Gilman, 2001) and academic achievement (Gilman and Huebner, 2006), and negatively correlated with psychopathological problems such as depression and social stress (Gilman and Huebner, 2006). Individuals with positive subjective well-being have consistently been shown to report high levels of life satisfaction, as well as, satisfaction across multiple life domains (e.g., marriage, income, physical health), positive emotions, increased mental health, and a longer life (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005). Fogle *et al.* (2002) found life satisfaction to be positively correlated with extraversion and social self-efficacy, negatively correlated with neuroticism, and to mediate the relationship between life satisfaction and extraversion, but not between life Satisfaction and neuroticism.

Environmental variable and life satisfaction:

Various environmental variables such as parenting behaviour, parenting style, family composition, interparental relationship, parent-child conflict, social support, and cultural influences were stronger predictors of adolescent' life satisfaction. Research indicates that adolescents' life satisfaction is associated with a range of different family characteristics, including parental involvement, positive parent–child relationships, parental social support (Gilman and Huebner, 2006; Suldo and Huebner, 2006) and interparental relationship (Chappel, 2011). Suldo and Huebner (2006) found evidence for the importance of parental support for adolescent well-being by examining individuals with very low, average, and very high levels of life satisfaction. Their results indicated that the level of parental support was different for all three groups of adolescents, with greater support associated with higher satisfaction. Parental psychological control is related to higher levels of hostile affect and lower level of personal efficacy, self-esteem and life satisfaction (Aquilino and Supple, 2001). Chappel *et al.* (2014) found perceived interparental conflict to be the strongest predictor of the variance in life satisfaction scores. Such research clearly indicates that family processes and relationships are linked to adolescents' life satisfaction. Life satisfaction may differ across social, situational, personality and cultural factors.

Studies Related to Interparental Relationship and Life Satisfaction:

Interparental conflict can change or deteriorate individuals' subjective well-being. In a sample of Chinese adolescents, high life satisfaction was correlated with positive parental style, low parental conflict and less family dysfunction (Shek, 1997). Plunkett and Henry (1999) reported that adolescents who perceive high or unresolved parental conflict are less satisfied with their families. They examined the relationship between adolescent reports of selected demographic variables (gender, age, family form), interparental conflict (style, content, intensity, resolution), stress due to the pileup of stressors, coping strategies (social support, detrimental coping), and adolescent family life satisfaction. The sample was comprised of 155 adolescents ranging from 14 to 18 years of age who completed self-report questionnaires at one of three rural Oklahoma high schools. Four dimensions of interparental conflict (overt conflict style, conflict about childrearing, conflict about family roles/finances, conflict resolution), stress due to pileup, social support coping, and detrimental coping were significantly related to family life satisfaction.

McCullough *et al.* (2000) also examined major life

events and chronic stressful events and their relationship with subjective wellbeing (positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction). A sample of 92 students in high school completed measures of positive events, negative events, daily events, and major events using the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale (APES), positive and negative affect (measured via the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule [PANAS]) and life satisfaction (measured by the SLSS). Positive daily events were the strongest contributors to life satisfaction and uniquely contributed to the variance in life satisfaction above that of major life events.

Xin *et al.* (2009) examined the mediation effect of cognitive appraisals and the moderation role of peer status in the association between interparental conflict and adolescents' affective well-being based on a sample of 549 Chinese adolescents from 7th to 12th grades. Interparental conflict properties, adolescents' cognitive appraisals of conflict, affective well-being, and peer status were measured through scales and peer nomination surveys. The results of structure equation modeling showed that: cognitive appraisals totally mediated the association between interparental conflict and adolescents' affective well-being; peer status moderated the effect of interparental conflict on adolescents' positive affect but not on negative affect; and the relationship between interparental conflict and positive affect showed different patterns for adolescents of different social status.

Chappel (2011) explored (a) the relationship between family stressors (*i.e.*, socio-economic status, family structure, major life events, interparental conflict) and adolescents' life satisfaction, (b) the overall contribution of family stressors to life satisfaction and which stressors are most strongly associated with life satisfaction, and (c) whether life satisfaction mediates the relationship between family stressors and substance use. He analyzed self-report surveys from 183 middle school students. Results indicated that experiencing major life events and interparental conflict were unique predictors of life satisfaction, and all the family stressors combined accounted for 37% of the variance in life satisfaction. Additionally, the relationship between these two family stressors and substance use was shown to be mediated by life satisfaction.

Few studies have examined the relationship between family stressors and life satisfaction, a positive indicator of mental health. Chappel *et al.* (2014) explored the relationships between specific family stressors (*i.e.*, low socioeconomic status, disrupted family structure, cumulative major life events, and perceived interparental conflict) and adolescents' life satisfaction in a sample of 181 middle school students. Participants completed psychometrically sound self-report measures of the aforementioned constructs. Results from a simultaneous regression analysis indicated that the four forms of family stress accounted for 37 % of the variance in life satisfaction; experiencing major life events ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < .05$) and perceiving interparental conflict ($\beta = -0.41$, $p < .05$) emerged as unique predictors of life satisfaction.

Fosco and Feinberg (2015) examined the longitudinal implications of adolescents' exposure to interparental conflict for their developmental success. In the proposed developmental cascade model, adolescents' perceptions of parental conflict as threatening is a risk factor for diminished self-efficacy, which would account for diminished adjustment. They presented longitudinal data for 768 sixth-grade students and their families over four time points, ending in eighth grade. Replication of longitudinal support for threat as a mediator of the link between interparental conflict and emotional distress was found; however, findings did not support threat as a mediator of behaviour problems or subjective well-being. Threat was found to mediate the longitudinal association between interparental conflict and self-efficacy. A developmental cascade model supported a risk process in which interparental conflict was related to adolescents' threat appraisals, which undermined self-efficacy beliefs, and was then linked with emotional distress, behaviour problems, and subjective well-being.

Tiwari and Verma (2015) examined the role of perceived interparental relationship in mental health problems of adolescents. Studies indicated that poor interparental relationship is associated with difficulties in adolescents' psychological functioning. In this context it was hypothesized that perception of better relationship between parents would be negatively associated with various mental health problems. The sample for present study comprised 400 adolescents with age range of 15 to 19 years. Correlational analysis revealed that perception of interparental relationship was negatively correlated with all the mental health problems (anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms, and social dysfunction) among adolescent boys whereas negative associations have been obtained with depression and social dysfunction among

adolescent girls. Further regression analysis indicated perceived interparental relationship emerging as a significant predictor for most of the mental health problems of adolescents.

Shahinuzzaman *et al.* (2016) examined the relationships between interparental conflict and adolescent's psychological distress. Study examined the relationship of conflict properties, threat to self, and self-blame with adolescent's psychological distress. Results indicated that conflict properties, threat to self and self-blame were predictors of psychological distress. These three variables accounted for only 89.5% variance of psychological distress. Among these three variables, threat to self was the strongest predictor, which alone explained by 69.9% variance of psychological distress.

Fosco and Lydon-Staley (2017) disentangled situational (within-family) and global (between-family) appraisal processes to better map hypothesized processes to adolescents' experiences in the family. This 21 days daily dairy study sampled 151 parents and their adolescents (61.5% female). Multilevel mediation analysis indicated that, on days when interparental conflict was elevated, adolescents experienced more threat and self blame. In turn, when adolescents experienced more threat appraisals, they experienced diminished positive well-being; whereas days when adolescents felt more self-blame, they experienced increased negative mood and diminished positive well-being.

The quality of the interparental relationship is recognized as an important influence on child and adolescent psychopathology. Harold and Sellers (2018) reviewed and pointed out that children are affected by attributes of interparental conflict, specifically how parents express and manage conflicts in their relationship, across a continuum of expressed severity and negativity – ranging from silence to violence. Furthermore, they highlighted that children's emotional, behavioral, social, academic outcomes and future interpersonal relationships are adversely affected by conflict between parents.

Theories explaining the mechanism of association between interparental relationship and adolescents' behaviour:

Considerable research has documented that prolonged exposure to interparental conflict has negative consequences for children and adolescents. Recently, researchers have highlighted several mechanisms that underlie children's adaptation to interparental conflict

suggesting that conflict occurring between parents adversely affects children through two primary mechanisms: (a) The first suggests that interparental conflict leads to disruptions in the parent-child relationship, which in turn leads to child maladjustment (Cox *et al.*, 2001), (b) The second proposes that the impact of conflict is mediated in part by children's cognitions, specifically, their attributions regarding the cause of conflict and their perceptions of their own ability to affect the conflict (Grych and Cardoza-Fernandez, 2001).

According to the emotional security theory (EST; Cummings and Davies, 1996), witnessing destructive interparental conflict sensitizes children to concerns about preserving their security. Threats to security are manifested in children's negative internal representations of the consequences for the welfare of the self and family. Although these representations may be adaptive initially by sharpening children's ability to identify danger cues in high-conflict homes, maladaptive implications for their long-term psychological adjustment are expected (Davies *et al.*, 2006). Similarly, the cognitive contextual framework hypothesizes that elevated interparental conflict increases children's vulnerability to psychological problems by heightening their appraisals of threat in the family (Grych and Fincham, 1990).

Grych and Fincham (1990) suggested that adolescents are likely to experience significant adjustment problems if they are exposed to frequent episodes of conflict between parents, which are aggressive or hostile, poorly resolved and child-related. In contrast, if children are exposed to only occasional episodes of conflict between parents, which are relatively calm, successfully resolved, and centered on factors other than child, they are less likely to experience problem behaviours. They also emphasized that adolescent's perception and understanding of conflict are critical. If conflict is perceived as threatening, children make three additional appraisals, such as causal stability, ascription of blame and coping efficacy. Poor adjustment results from children perceiving the conflict as stable, blaming themselves for the conflict and feeling that they are unable to cope effectively with it. Davies and Cummings (1994) criticized the mediating role of cognition emphasized by Grych and Fincham (1990) and suggested that emotionality plays a central role in children's coping with parental conflict.

Emery (1982) suggested four main processes through which parental conflict may produce negative impact on adolescents' psychological well-being: (1)

Children model their parents' ineffectual conflict resolution styles (*i.e.* children model aggression or withdrawal in their communication with others); (2) In the midst of parental conflict, parents practice more inconsistent and harsh disciplinary actions, which lead to increased child behaviour problems; (3) parental conflict disrupts parental attachment bonds to their children; and (4) parental conflict serves as a general stressor to a child's environment, which can threaten a child's sense of security.

Modeling is one of the most cited mechanisms through which parental conflict is expected to affect children (Amato *et al.*, 1995). The basic view of modeling theory is that children tend to imitate their parents (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, predicting that children whose parents engage in conflict will learn to respond to problems using aggression. The possibility that fathers act more aggressively and mothers react to conflict with more anxiety and withdrawal might explain results that boys tend to respond to conflict with under controlled, externalizing behaviour and girls may respond to parental conflict through over controlled or internalizing behaviour (Fainsilber-Katz and Gottman, 1993).

Implications:

In general the research literature suggests that adolescent's perception of better interparental relationship is positively associated with the life satisfaction among adolescents. Review has presented the extant findings in the adolescent life satisfaction literature. This review suggests that adolescents' perception of positive interparental relationship during stressful periods of transition predicts better adolescents' adjustment, and satisfaction with their lives. It also educates parents to recognize the continued importance of their mutual relationship for adolescent' well being. Importance of interparental relationship for adolescents' well being may be useful for clinician and counsellors dealing with adolescents' psychological problems about the specific ways in which poor interparental relationship can affect the wellbeing and life satisfaction of adolescents. Review findings have important implication for family intervention. Study may help to educate parents to recognize the continued importance of healthy interparental relationship for adolescents' wellbeing and life satisfaction. Parents need to anticipate that their adolescent will require increased availability and support during periods of transition, such as entry into high school. Therefore,

Parents should maintain a harmony in their relationship for their adolescents in effective planning and management of this transition. Review provides insights into the importance of perception of interparental relationship for adolescents' well-being during current cultural globalization era.

Future Directions:

This review is based on correlational studies which indicate that perception of positive interparental relationship is positively associated with life satisfaction among adolescents. Additional research is required in order to further discover causal pathways through which interparental relationship effect and influence how adolescents perceive their lives. Future research should utilize longitudinal designs to assess the associations between interparental relationship and life satisfaction among adolescents. Various studies did not test mechanisms of the mediational paths from the emotional quality of the interparental relationship, to children's mattering to father or mother, and to adjustment. Mechanisms that should be explored in future research include parents' emotional security in their relationship, parenting behaviours, adolescents' self-esteem and reciprocal child- and parent-effects. The findings reveal the need to expand the traditional foci on interparental relationship and relationships with mothers and fathers.

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