

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN MOTHERS AND CHILDREN

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Abstract

Introduction

A review of the literature indicates a growing interest among researchers seeking to understand psychological well-being. However, relatively few studies on the subject have been conducted in South Africa.

Aim

The aim of the study was to ascertain self-esteem and life satisfaction as indicators of psychological well-being among a sample of South African mothers and their children.

Methods

Participants were a convenience sample of 245 mothers and their children residing in Cape Town, South Africa. Data was collected using the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and Satisfaction with Life Scale.

Results

The results showed that the majority of mothers and children attained medium scores on measures of self-esteem and satisfaction with life.

Conclusion

The data also showed a significant positive relationship [$r = .14, p < .05$] between mother and child self-esteem levels. For both mothers and children, satisfaction with life levels was significantly related to self-esteem levels. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords:

Self-esteem, satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, socio-economic status, marital status.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological well-being is a fundamental characteristic which may be indicated by self-esteem and satisfaction with life. Self-esteem is considered to be an evaluative component of the self and important for individuals striving for achievement, success and independence (Cheng & Furnham, 2004). Because self-esteem is evaluative, researchers have extensively used it as an indicator of psychological and emotional well-being of and between children and adults (Cheng & Furnham, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Geca, 1971; Harter, 1999; Ryan, Stiller & Lynch, 1994).

High self-esteem has been linked to happiness and general psychological adjustment, which is synonymous with psychological well-being (Cheng & Furnham, 2004). In contrast, low self-esteem has been linked to a lack of self-respect, motivation, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, the belief that one is not as good as others and the inability to reach personal potential which can cause pain, distress, breakdown, bad behaviour, relationship problems and even depression (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; De Witt & Booyen, 1995, 1999; Gecas, 1971; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Hartley-Brewer, 1996; Van Der Ross, 1993;). Satisfaction with life is defined as a cognitive-judgemental process of one's life and is considered to reflect an individual's degree of happiness (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). Happiness in turn is defined as the degree to which an individual favourably judges one's quality of his or her life (Veenhoven, 1991). An individual's satisfaction with his or her life is associated with increased levels of self-esteem, global well-being and positive human functioning (Diener, et al., 1992; Gilman & Huebner, 2003). Satisfaction with life is dependent on the self and is therefore strongly and significantly correlated with self-esteem (Diener & Diener, 1995).

The relationship between mother psychological well-being and parent behavioural patterns and child well-being, adjustment and healthy appropriate behavioural outcomes have been well documented (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Baumrind, 1997; Bosacki, 2003; Gecas, 1971; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Grolnick, 2003; Milevsky, Schlechter, Netter, & Keehn, 2007; Robila and Krishnakumar, 2006; Shek, 2006; Soenens, 2006).

Findings of previous research studies suggest that the mother's psychological well-being is related to the child's psychological adjustment and development (Brody, et. al., 2002; Rosenberg 1984; Shelton, 1990; Skuy, Koeberg & Fridjhon, 1997); that a child's positive sense of self was better predicted by the quality of the child-mother attachment than by the quality of the child-father attachment (Verschueren & Marcoen, 1999; 2002).

The aim of this study was to ascertain self-esteem and life satisfaction as indicators of psychological well-being among a sample of South African mothers and their children. Participants were drawn from low and high socio-economic groups and single parent and dual parent households. The hypotheses of the study were:

- a) There is a significant difference in the psychological well-being of single and married mother-child dyads
- b) There is a significant difference in the psychological well-being between mother-child dyads living in low and high socio-economic environments
- c) There is a significant association between mother and child psychological well-being

METHOD

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of children attending eight schools in the northern suburbs of the Cape Town. The schools in the area were classified as advantaged or disadvantaged based on school fees paid by parents. Children between the ages of 10 and 12 years were randomly selected using the school register as the sampling frame. The final sample consisted of 245 mother-child dyads as follows: The mean age of the children was 11 years, while the mean grade level was 5. There were more female (65%) than male (35%) participants. For mothers 73% mothers were married and 68% were high socio-economic status with ages ranging from 25 to 49 years. The criterion used to establish socio-economic status was household income, the official indicator established by Statistics South Africa.

Measures

The research tools consisted of the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLS):

SEI

The SEI was developed to assess a person's ability to evaluate his or her self. The scale is a self-administered questionnaire which can be used with participants aged eight to adults. The School Short Form and the Adult Form were chosen for the current study to measure the levels of self-esteem of mothers and children. SEI requests participants to complete 25 items to which participants have to respond with either "Like Me" or "Unlike Me". Items included were "Things usually don't bother me"; "I give in easily"; "I have a low opinion of myself" and "Most people are better liked than me". A scoring key for each Form was used to attain a total raw score of each participant. The total raw score was multiplied by four (4) to attain a Total Self Score out of 100. The results for both mothers and children were easily comparable. High scores achieved on the SEI corresponded to high self-esteem and low scores indicate low self-esteem. In order to explain the position of an individual's self-esteem levels as compared with others in a group, the scores are interpreted as the upper quartile being considered as high self-esteem, the lower quartile as low self-esteem and the interquartile is considered as medium self-esteem.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale

The Satisfaction with Life Scale is a self-reported assessment developed to measure satisfaction with the respondent's life as a whole. The SWLS is a short, 5-item instrument designed to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life. The scale takes about one minute to complete and is in the public domain. The SWLS is scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied). Examples of some of the items are "I am satisfied with life" and "The conditions of my life are excellent". Scores on the SWLS correlate moderately to highly with other measures of subjective well-being, and correlate predictably with specific personality characteristics. The SWLS has been found to be suitable for use with different age groups (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) and has been previously used in a South African context (Wissing, et al., 1999).

RESULTS

Psychological well-being of mothers

The results of the study indicated that there was no significant difference between married and single

mothers nor between mothers living in high and low socio-economic environments with regard to psychological well-being (See Table 1). However, when the indicators of well-being were analysed separately, the data showed that high SES mothers scored significantly higher than low SES mothers for life satisfaction ($F(1, 192) = 6.46, p = .01$, partial eta squared = .03) and for self-esteem ($F(1, 192) = 15.87, p = .001$, partial eta squared = .08). In addition, married mothers scored significantly higher for life satisfaction than single mothers ($F(1, 192) = 12.23, p = .01$, partial eta squared = .06).

Psychological well-being of preadolescents

Preadolescents of mothers living in low socio-economic environments reported significantly lower self-esteem levels ($M=56.39, SD=15.39$) than preadolescents of mothers living in high socio-economic environments ($M=63.04, SD=15.08$): $F(1, 172) = 4.14, p = 0.04$. Table 2 shows that a difference between reported self-esteem levels by children of married mothers in low socio-economic environments ($M=54.74, SD=16.51$) than reported self-esteem levels of children of married mothers living in high socio-economic environments ($M=63.63, SD=15.07$). However, this difference was not significant.

Preadolescents' self-esteem scores were significant and positively related to how satisfied they were with their lives. There was a significant correlation ($r = .53, p < .01$) among preadolescents living in low socio-economic environments as compared to the other groups. There were significant positive relationships found between mothers' life satisfaction and mothers' self-esteem. Mothers who were single ($r = .56, p < .01$) and mothers living in higher socio-economic environments ($r = .58, p < .01$) had stronger correlations between their self-esteem scores and how satisfied they were with their lives. Table 3 shows the data.

A significant positive relationship was found between self-esteem of mothers ($r = .14, p < .05$) and preadolescents ($r = .20, p < .05$) in the total group and in the group of high SES mothers. The results showed a significant positive relationship between mothers' life satisfaction and mothers' self-esteem ($r = .48, p < .01$). Preadolescents' self-esteem scores were significantly and positively

related to life satisfaction scores ($r = .44, p < .01$). Further analyses indicated that neither mothers' satisfaction with life scores nor mothers' self-esteem scores were significantly related to preadolescents' satisfaction with life. A significant

positive relationship was found between married mothers' self-esteem and preadolescents' satisfaction with life ($r = .15, p < .05$). The data are shown in Table 4.

Table 1: Mean scores and SD for life satisfaction and self-esteem for the total group of mothers and for the subgroups of mothers

	Low SES		High SES		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Life Satisfaction						
Married Mothers	23.24	6.56	25.81	6.55	25.14	6.63
Single Mothers	18.96	7.18	22.15	6.83	20.62	7.12
Total Group	21.58	7.07	25.10	6.74	23.98	7.02
Self-esteem						
Married Mothers	62.42	20.85	72.30	17.18	69.73	18.64
Single Mothers	56.83	21.30	72.00	17.31	64.72	20.60
Total Group	60.26	21.03	72.24	17.14	68.45	19.23
Results of Analysis of Variance						
	Dependent Variable	df	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	
SES	Life Satisfaction	1	6.46	0.01	0.03	
	Self-esteem	1	15.87	0.00	0.08	
Marital Status	Life Satisfaction	1	12.23	0.00	0.06	
	Self-esteem	1	0.88	0.35	0.00	
SES * Marital Status (interaction)	Life Satisfaction	1	0.08	0.78	0.00	
	Self-esteem	1	0.71	0.40	0.00	

Table 2: Preadolescents' Mean scores and SD for life satisfaction and self-esteem as a function of mothers' marital status and SES level

	Low SES Mothers		High SES Mothers		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Children's Life Satisfaction						
Married Mothers	25.66	4.48	26.43	5.63	26.23	5.35
Single Mothers	27.00	6.98	24.58	6.65	25.74	6.85
Total Group	26.18	5.56	26.07	5.86	26.10	5.75
Children's Self-esteem						
Married Mothers	54.74	16.51	63.63	15.07	61.32	15.89
Single Mothers	59.00	13.36	60.62	15.17	59.84	14.20
Total Group	56.39	15.39	63.04	15.08	60.94	15.46
Results of Analysis of Variance						
	Dependent Variable	df	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	
SES	Life Satisfaction	1	0.71	0.40	0.00	
	Self-esteem	1	4.14	0.04	0.02	
Marital Status	Life Satisfaction	1	0.07	0.80	0.00	
	Self-esteem	1	0.06	0.81	0.00	
SES * Marital Status (interaction)	Life Satisfaction	1	2.66	0.10	0.01	
	Self-esteem	1	1.99	0.16	0.01	

Table 3: Correlations between life satisfaction and self-esteem

	Total Group N=245	Married Mothers N=178	Single Mothers N=67	High SES Mothers N=135	Low SES Mothers N=64
Preadols	.44**	.46**	.42**	.41**	.53**
Mothers	.48*	.44**	.56**	.58**	.41**

**p<0.01

*p<0.05

Table 4: Intercorrelations between mothers' and preadolescents' scores for self-esteem (S.E.) and satisfaction with life (SWL)

Preadols	Mothers	Total Group	Married Mothers	Single Mothers	High SES Mothers	Low SES Mothers
SWL	SWL	.10	.13	-.15	.05	.18
SWL	S.E.	.10	.15*	-.04	.16	-.06
S.E.	S.E.	.14*	.13	.16	.20*	-.02
S.E.	SWL	.10	.10	.00	.06	-.00

DISCUSSION

This study explored the psychological well-being of mothers and their preadolescents by using self-esteem and satisfaction with life as indicators of psychological well-being. The data of the study supported the hypothesis of an association between mother and preadolescent psychological well-being. In other words, the results suggest that when mothers are psychologically well their preadolescents would also be psychologically well. This finding is supported by previous research, which highlight that there is a relationship between mother-child psychological well-being and that a child's positive sense of self was better predicted by the quality of the child-mother attachment than by the quality of the child-father attachment (Brody, et al., 2002; Roman, 2003; Rosenberg 1984; Shelton, 1990; Skuy, Koeberg & Fridjhon, 1997; Verschueren & Marcoen, 1999; 2002).

However, the results also suggested that mother psychological well-being was only partly associated with the child's psychological well-being. In other words, only mother self-esteem was associated with preadolescent self-esteem, but not how satisfied mothers and preadolescents were with their lives. This could be because an individual's satisfaction with life is dependent on the self and not another individual's self-esteem or satisfaction with life (Diener, et al., 1992; Diener & Diener, 1995).

An examination of mother-preadolescent groups suggested significant differences for socio-economic groups rather than married and single mother-preadolescent groups. Thus even though single mothers may be considered to be at a greater disadvantage than their married counterparts (Ceballo & Mcloyd, 2002; Franz, Lensche & Schmitz, 2003; Olson, Ceballo & Park,

2002; Whitehead & Holland, 2003), there may be no significant differences in their psychologically well-being. This is in contrast with other studies (Crosier, Butterworth & Rodgers, 2007; Davies, Avison & McAlpine, 1997; Targosz, et al., 2003; Wade & Cairney, 2000) which indicate that single mothers are more likely to be susceptible to depression. However, the suggestion that marital status is possibly not a factor in the levels of psychological being of mothers is supported by previous studies, which indicated that there are possibly other factors associated with mother psychological well-being (Bank, Forgatch, Patterson & Fetrow, 1993; Feldman et al., 1990; Florsheim, Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1998; Segal-Engelchin & Wozner, 2005). One of these factors could be socio-economic status.

The results showed socio-economic status may have an effect on self-esteem of mothers and preadolescents, particularly for the low socio-economic group. Single mothers living in lower socio-economic environments reported lower levels of self-esteem and satisfaction with life. The reality in South Africa is that many people, women especially, have lower education levels, low paying employment opportunities, sometimes lack of spousal financial support and inadequate and insufficient social support (Statistics South Africa, 2007). Being a single mother in a low socio-economic environment presents a great challenge to mothers and children as there is the added burden of being the sole provider in the family. The suggestion that socio-economic status is associated with mother-preadolescent psychological well-being is supported by previous research (Chua, 2003; Frisby & Crawford, 1995; Le Bruyns & Pauw, 2004; Trowbridge, 1972; Twenge & Campbell, 2002: 61).

While many South African mothers are confronted with socio and economic hardships on a daily basis the results of this study suggest that mothers and preadolescents are psychologically well. The results suggest that being a married or single mother does not significantly contribute to the mother-preadolescent relationship, but that socio-economic status is the main contributing factor to psychological wellbeing. Thus being single living in a low socio-economic environment poses more challenges than being married living in a low socio-economic environment and being married or single living in a high socio-economic environment. Future studies may clarify this relationship.

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