

Helping Attitude and Psychological Well-Being in Older Widowed Women

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between *helping attitude* and *psychological well-being*, and to determine if there are significant differences in *helping attitude* and *psychological well-being* between older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes. This study focused on the six dimensions of psychological well-being proposed by Ryff (1989b). A purposive sampling method was employed to select older widowed women aged between 65 - 74 years (20 living with families and 20 in old age homes). The Helping Attitude Scale (Nickell, 1998) and the Psychological Well-being Scales (Ryff, 1989) were administered to the participants to measure the two variables. The obtained data were statistically treated using Product Moment Correlation and t-test. The study found that there is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and *purpose in life* in older widowed women living with their families. It was also found that older widowed women living with their families scored significantly higher than older widowed women living in old age homes in two dimensions of the psychological well-being scales: *environmental mastery* and *self-acceptance*. Such an understanding may be helpful in designing intervention programmes to foster and maintain well-being in older widowed women.

Keywords: *Helping Attitude, Psychological Well-being.*

Nickell (1998) defined helping attitude as the beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to helping people. Altruism, often used as a synonym for helping behaviour, can be defined as actions or behaviours that are intended to benefit another person (Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti, 2011). Helping attitude or behaviour is an established noble behaviour in many cultures and is an important feature of many religions throughout the world. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000b) consider altruism to be an important process which fosters the collective well-being of the society.

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Psychological well-being is a concept that includes aspects of wellness such as positive assessments of oneself and one's past life (*Self-Acceptance*), a sense of sustained growth and evolution as an individual (*Personal Growth*), the idea that one's life is purposeful and significant (*Purpose in Life*), maintaining good quality relationships with others (*Positive Relations with Others*), the ability to direct one's life and the surrounding world successfully (*Environmental Mastery*), and a sense of self-determination (*Autonomy*) (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Life-span developmental psychologists acknowledge adulthood as a time when changes occur in important psychological processes. For instance, according to socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles, 1999), when endings are brought to the notice of individuals, they alter their social objectives and give priority to emotionally important goals over other ones. Getting older is the most powerful indicator that time is limited and that the most paramount ending is drawing closer. This theory proposes that individuals tend to become more optimistic with age, as long as they are dynamically managing their socio-emotional world. Therefore, the composition of psychological processes surrounding emotional experience and well-being may alter throughout adulthood. The predictors of emotional experience do not remain fixed either. Nevertheless, as life-span developmental psychologists have begun to grasp the age differences in how individuals experience emotions, much less attention has been given to the revelation of the predictors of these experiences across the life-span of an adult. The attention of the researchers towards optimism as a predictor of well-being is established in cognitive models in which the perpetual frames of processing information affect emotions (Beck, 1967). There are numerous studies that link optimism to affective consequences like depressive symptoms (for example, Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Vickers & Vogeltanz, 2000). Similarly, the impact of helping attitude or altruism on physical and psychological well-being has also become the focus of researchers in recent times.

Generally older adults seem to lead positive and emotionally satisfying lives (Carstensen & Charles, 1998). Though old age has usually been perceived as a period of emotional flattening and detachment (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Schulz, 1985), recent research has disproved this notion. Older adults not only experience a variety of emotions, but are more proficient at avoiding negative emotional states than their younger counterparts (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Levenson, Carstensen, Friesen, & Ekman, 1991). Older adults do not display decline in life satisfaction when compared with young adults (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Though the above cited studies give a surprisingly positive depiction of subjective well-being in old age, there are individual differences. Just like individuals from any other age group, some older adults have better well-being, while others are doing worse (Diener et al., 1999).

According to Adlerian psychology, altruism and social interest are attractive personality traits and are the very foundations of mental health (Rareshide & Kern, 1991). Recent research shows that there exists a strong relationship between compassion, helping behavior, or both, on one hand and well-being, health, and longevity, on the other (for example, Post, 2005; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario & Tang, 2003). The relationship between altruism and well-being is well portrayed in Charles Dickens' story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a miser, who changes and

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becomes a philanthropic person. With every act of kindness, Scrooge experiences happiness. Towards the end of the story, he is considered to be the most magnanimous individual in all of England and seems to have become more vivacious and healthier. He seemed to be happier with life the more unselfish or giving he became, following the pattern of the “helper’s high” (Luks, 1988). Research conducted on the benefits of altruism proposes that helping attitudes are linked with better life adjustment (Crandall & Lehman, 1977), perceived meaningfulness of life (Crandall, 1984; Mozdierz, Greenblatt & Murphy, 1986), marital adjustment (Markowski & Greenwood, 1984), less hopelessness (Miller, Denton & Tobacyk, 1986) and depression (Crandall, 1975). Also, altruism has been perceived to be a predictor of physical health status (Zarski, Bubbenzer & West, 1986) and a moderator of life stress (Crandall, 1978).

There are no theory-based formulations of well-being despite its importance in the study of psychology. For more than 20 years, the study of psychological well-being has been directed by two key perceptions of positive functioning. One formulation can be traced to Bradburn's (1969) classic work which differentiated between positive and negative emotions and interpreted happiness as the balance between the two. Bradburn's work on the composition of psychological well-being put forward the initial difference between positive and negative emotions. The second key perception, which has attained importance among sociologists, highlights life satisfaction as the principal indicator of well-being. When regarded as a cognitive component, it was observed that life satisfaction promoted happiness, which is an emotional dimension of positive functioning (e.g., Andrews & McKennell, 1980; Andrews & Withey, 1976; Bryant & Veroff, 1982; Campbell, Converse & Rodgers, 1976). Other researchers have studied well-being in terms of life satisfaction and queries related to work, income, social relationships, and neighborhood (Andrews, 1991; Diener, 1984). The combinations of the various structures of positive functioning have served as the theoretical infrastructure of Ryff's multi-dimensional model of well-being (Ryff, 1989b, 1995). This model of well-being included six different aspects of positive psychological functioning: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance (Ryff, 1989b).

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, though studies have been conducted on the relationship between helping attitude or altruism and psychological well-being of older adults in the West, such a study has not yet been conducted in India, thus providing scope for studying the thought process of the Indian older adult. The purpose of the current study is to see if there is a relationship between *helping attitude* and the six dimensions of *psychological well-being* (viz., *autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life* and *self-acceptance*) in older widowed women who either live in old age homes or with their families. Broadly, the present study purports to answer the following questions: Is there any relationship between *helping attitude* and *psychological well-being* of older widowed women? Do the levels of *helping attitude* and *psychological well-being* vary depending on whether the older widowed women live with their families or in old age homes?

OBJECTIVES

- A. To determine if there is a relationship between *helping attitude* and the six dimensions of *psychological well-being* (viz., *autonomy*, *environmental mastery*, *personal growth*, *positive relations with others*, *purpose in life* and *self-acceptance*).
- B. To determine if there is a difference between the older widowed women who live with their families and those who live in old age homes with respect to *helping attitude*.
- C. To determine if there is a difference between the older widowed women who live with their families and those who live in old age homes with respect to the six dimensions of *psychological well-being* (viz., *autonomy*, *environmental mastery*, *personal growth*, *positive relations with others*, *purpose in life* and *self-acceptance*).

HYPOTHESES

- H1a.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *autonomy* in older widowed women living with their families.
- H1b.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *autonomy* in older widowed women living in old age homes.
- H2a.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *environmental mastery* in older widowed women living with their families.
- H2b.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *environmental mastery* in older widowed women living in old age homes.
- H3a.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *personal growth* in older widowed women living with their families.
- H3b.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *personal growth* in older widowed women living in old age homes.
- H4a.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *positive relations with others* in older widowed women living with their families.
- H4b.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *positive relations with others* in older widowed women living in old age homes.
- H5a.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *purpose in life* in older widowed women living with their families.
- H5b.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *purpose in life* in older widowed women living in old age homes.
- H6a.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *self-acceptance* in older widowed women living with their families.
- H6b.** There is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *self-acceptance* in older widowed women living in old age homes.
- H7.** There is a significant difference between older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes with respect to *helping attitude*.
- H8.** There is a significant difference between older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes with respect to the dimension of *autonomy*.
- H9.** There is a significant difference between older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes with respect to the dimension of *environmental mastery*.

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- H10.** There is a significant difference between older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes with respect to the dimension of *personal growth*.
- H11.** There is a significant difference between older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes with respect to the dimension of *positive relations with others*.
- H12.** There is a significant difference between older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes with respect to the dimension of *purpose in life*.
- H13.** There is a significant difference between older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes with respect to the dimension of *self-acceptance*.

METHOD

Research Design

The current study is of the quantitative type and uses a correlational design to determine if there is a relationship between *helping attitude* and the six dimensions of *psychological well-being* (viz., *autonomy*, *environmental mastery*, *personal growth*, *positive relations with others*, *purpose in life* and *self-acceptance*). The study also adopted a between-group design to assess the differences in *helping attitude* and the six dimensions of *psychological well-being* between older widowed women who lived with their families and those who lived in old age homes.

Participants

Purposive sampling method was used to collect the sample comprising of 20 older women (widowed, between 65-74 years) who lived with their families and 20 older women (widowed, between 65-74 years) who lived in old age homes [n=40]. Older adults who were female, widowed and within the age range of 65-74 years were included in the study. Older women who were widowed but below the age of 65 years and above the age of 74 years and those older women whose spouses were alive were not included in the study. Older adults, who were male, were excluded from the study.

Instruments

The study uses two instruments: Helping Attitude Scale and Psychological Well-Being Scales.

Helping Attitude Scale (HAS): This scale was developed by Gary S. Nickell (1998). It is a 5-point Likert-type scale measuring positive and negative attitudes towards helping others. It has 20 items and the response to each item ranges from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The scale also uses reverse scoring for 6 items. The scores for the reversely scored items are reversed and all twenty scores are added to obtain the total HAS score. The total score on the scale can range from 20 to 100 with a score of 60 being neutral score. The test-retest reliability of the scale is $r = .847$. The internal consistency for the scale is .869.

Psychological Well-Being Scales: The Psychological Well-Being Scales were developed by Carol Ryff (1989). Initially the scale had 6 dimensions and each dimension had 20 items. The scales have been adapted to 14-items, 9-items and 3-items versions. The present study uses the 9-

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item version of the Psychological Well-Being Scales. The scales are a 6-point Likert-type scale with the responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). The scales measure six dimensions: *self-acceptance*, *positive relations with others*, *autonomy*, *environmental mastery*, *purpose in life* and *personal growth*. The total score on each dimension can range from 9 to 54 with a score of 27 being neutral score. The internal consistency coefficients for the scales are: self-acceptance - .91, positive relations with others - .88, autonomy - .83, environmental mastery - .86, purpose in life - .88, and personal growth - .85. The test-retest reliability coefficients for the scales are: self-acceptance - .85; positive relations with others - .83; autonomy - .88; environmental mastery - .81; purpose in life - .82; and personal growth - .81.

Procedure

The study was initiated by administering the questionnaires to older adults who possessed the required criteria (widowed females, between 65 - 74 years) and who lived with their families. Informed consent was taken from the participants. The participants were instructed verbally and were also given written instructions. Most of the participants preferred to have the statements read out to them and then they would rate each statement given in the questionnaires. The participants were encouraged to seek clarification on any aspect related to the study. Likewise, for the older widowed women living in old age homes, permission was taken from the person-in-charge of an old age home to administer the questionnaires. On an average the time taken to administer the scales was 45 minutes.

Statistics Used

The statistics used in the present study to analyse the collected data were mean, standard deviation, correlation and t-tests.

RESULTS

Table 1

Correlation between Helping Attitude and the six dimensions of the Psychological Well-Being Scales in older widowed women living with their families (n=20) and older widowed women living in old age homes (n=20).

Dimensions of the Psychological Well-Being Scales	Helping Attitude Scale	
	Older widowed women living with their families	Older widowed women living in old age homes
Autonomy (r 1)	0.3896	0.2216
Environmental Mastery (r 2)	0.0682	0.2006
Personal Growth (r 3)	0.2442	-0.2137
Positive Relations with Others (r 4)	0.3447	0.0446
Purpose in Life (r 5)	0.5276*	-0.3575
Self-Acceptance (r 6)	0.2437	-0.0454

*p<0.05

Table 1 shows that there is a significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *purpose in life* in older widowed women living with their families [$r(18) = 0.5276, p < .05$]. However, there is no significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *purpose in life* in older widowed women living in old age homes. Moreover, there is no significant correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimensions of *autonomy*, *environmental mastery*, *personal growth*, *positive relations with others* and *self-acceptance* in both the groups: older widowed women living with their families and older widowed women living in old age homes. Thus, **hypothesis H5a is accepted**. However, **hypotheses H1a – H4b and H5b – H6b are rejected**.

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Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation and *t*-ratio of the Helping Attitude Scale and the six dimensions of the Psychological Well-Being Scales for the older widowed women living with their families (*n*=20) and the older widowed women living in old age homes (*n*=20).

	Older widowed women living with their families		Older widowed women living in old age homes		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Helping attitude	76.05	9.9572	74.9	8.4669	0.3835
Autonomy	35.4	5.9531	35.5	7.5398	0.0454
Environmental Mastery	35.1	4.6314	31.5	4.9142	2.2916*
Personal Growth	29.05	6.8445	29.7	5.3207	0.3268
Positive Relations with Others	37.55	8.4408	33.3	4.9709	1.8912
Purpose in Life	31.9	5.6736	34.6	7.1651	1.2877
Self-Acceptance	37.15	5.4979	31.9	3.5341	3.5013**

**p*<0.05

***p*<0.01

Table 2 shows that there is significant difference in the means of the dimensions of *environmental mastery* (*p*<0.05) and *self-acceptance* (*p*<0.01) between older widowed women living with their families and older widowed women living in old age homes. This means that (as is evident from the mean scores in Table 2) the older widowed women living with their families scored higher on the dimension of *environmental mastery* (*M* = 35.1) and on the dimension of *self-acceptance* (*M* = 37.15) than the older widowed women living in old age homes (*M* = 31.5 and *M* = 31.9 respectively). However, there are no significant differences in the means of *helping attitude*, *autonomy*, *personal growth*, *positive relations with others* and *purpose in life* between the two groups. Thus, **hypotheses H9 and H13 are accepted** and hypotheses **H7, H8, H10, H11 and H12 are rejected**.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the obtained results indicated significant positive correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *purpose in life* in older widowed women living with their families. However, the correlation between *helping attitude* and the other dimensions of *psychological well-being* (viz., *autonomy*, *environmental mastery*, *personal growth*, *positive relations with others* and *self-acceptance*) were not found to be significant in older widowed women living with their families. Moreover, in case of older widowed women living in old age homes, the correlations between *helping attitude* and the six dimensions of *psychological well-being* were not found to be significant. The significant positive correlation between *helping attitude* and the dimension of *purpose in life* in older widowed women living with their families may be an indication of their underlying sense of belongingness and the motivation to do something for their family members. According to Reker (2000), purpose in life may emerge from enduring values or ideals, humanistic concerns, helping behaviour, relationship with nature, traditions and culture, personal relationships, creative activities, leisure activities, financial security, and meeting basic needs in individuals. Helping behaviours, such as volunteer work, act like a role-identity which gives a sense of meaning and purpose in life, which in turn may enhance the well-being of an individual (Thoits, 1992).

The present study also revealed significant differences between older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes with respect to the dimensions of *environmental mastery* and *self-acceptance*. In other words, the older widowed women living with their families scored higher on the dimensions of *environmental mastery* and *self-acceptance* than the older widowed women living in old age homes. However, no significant differences were observed between the two groups with respect to the dimensions of *helping attitude*, *autonomy*, *personal growth*, *positive relations with others* and *purpose in life*. The higher scores of older widowed women living with their families on the dimension of *environmental mastery* may be accounted for by the fact that these women have been living in a known environment where they are reasonably well adjusted. They live in a place which has been their 'home' for many years. Hence, these women are able to select or generate, with relative ease, environments suited to their needs (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Knight, Davison, McGabe & Mellor, 2011). Likewise, the older widowed women living with their families scored higher on the dimension of *self-acceptance*. As these women live with their loved ones, they enjoy a feeling of belongingness. Also, more often than not, grandchildren are a source of love and happiness that in turn fosters the older widowed woman's sense of worthiness and acceptance of self (Ryff & Essex, 1991). Moreover, living with their children and grandchildren, and being able to be a part of their happiness, probably enhances their acceptance of their past life. Thus, older widowed women who live with their families tend to have overall positive attitudes toward themselves (Ryff & Essex, 1991).

Broadly speaking, this study tends to indicate that irrespective of whether they live with their families or in old age homes, the older widowed women have secured reasonably high scores on *helping attitude* and the six dimensions of *psychological well-being*. Schwartz et al. (2003) have found that older females are more likely to help people when compared to other

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individuals. Sheldon and Kasser (2001) have determined that as people grow older, they tend to have more mature goals which in turn lead to greater well-being. This is in accordance with the findings of Ryff and her colleagues that purpose, autonomy, growth, and meaning play an important role in the older adults' not only adapting but also being able to thrive in later life and also in their well-being (Keyes, 1998; Ryff, 1995; Ryff & Singer 1998). Though old age is usually viewed as a period of decline and degeneration (Herzog et al., 1982; Pfeiffer, 1977), the present study has shown that older adults tend to exhibit prosocial behaviour (helping) and also enjoy a high level of psychological well-being, regardless of where they live. While there are differences in helping attitude and psychological well-being of older widowed women living with their families and those living in old age homes, the differences are not enough to determine which is better for the well-being of older widowed women, living with family or living in old age homes, as other factors such as socio-economic status, locus of control, quality of life, etc. may also affect the well-being of individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- A. Future studies can be conducted with a larger sample and involve other factors which affect well-being such as locus of control, attributional style, hope, quality of life, and the like.
- B. Since the present study includes only widowed women, a study can also be conducted on the helping attitude and psychological well-being of older females whose spouses are alive and also on the helping attitude and psychological well-being of older men.
- C. Further studies can be conducted to determine if helping attitude and psychological well-being varies between older men and older women.

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