

Relationship Between Attitude Towards Children, Psychological Well-being and Perceived Stress of Expectant Parents

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ABSTRACT

Becoming a parent is a major shift in the life of any individual as they undergo lot many changes in the physical, psychological and economical aspects of their life. The pregnancy period is considered as the crucial period in which not only the baby develops but also a father and a mother is in the process of making themselves fit for the role of parents. The happiness and excitement of becoming parents is expected to be accompanied by varying levels of stress from the initial days. Various factors that induce and influence the stress experienced by expectant parents have been studied earlier in the research literature while the factor of attitude towards children has been left untapped. The current study tried to understand if the attitude towards children play any role in the perceived stress and psychological well-being of expectant parents. The Affect Balance Scale (Bradburn, 2015), Barnett Liking for Children Scale (Barnett & Sinisi, 1990) and Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et. al., 1983) were the tools used to quantitatively measure the different variables of the study. Karl Pearson's correlation, linear regression and t-tests were conducted to analyse the data statistically using SPSS. Based on the results, the study concluded that there is a significant negative relationship between perceived stress and psychological well-being of expectant parents, with the relationship being stronger among expectant fathers when compared with that of the expectant mothers. It is evident that the perceived stress of expectant parents negatively predicts their psychological well-being. It also clarified that there is no significant difference in the perceived stress, psychological well-being and attitude towards children among the expectant fathers and mothers. The major understanding from the study was that the attitude towards children did not have any relationship with the perceived stress or psychological well-being of expectant parents. The results have been discussed further in the paper with a proper note on the limitations and future scope of the study.

Keywords: *Attitude Towards Children, Expectant Parents, Perceived Stress, Psychological Well-being*

Goals, dreams and aspirations have always been the driving force for people to live their lives, but to attain any of those it becomes mandatory that people work on their health to think of anything further. Maintaining a functional human body is not what it only means to remain healthy, rather it is all about holistic health that people should be

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concerned about (McKee, 1988). From the period when the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1948) defined health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, the entire perspective of looking at health has changed significantly. It is not anymore considered as the absence of physical illness alone and brought mental well-being and social well-being into the spotlight. The concept of well-being took over the discussions and gained popularity with the focus on the PERMA model which stated that Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning and Accomplishments constitute the well-being of people (Seligman, 2011). It was through the development of humanistic psychology and positive psychology the concept of psychological well-being came into the discourse and still it remains a very basic aspect of human life to be learned and explored further as it forms the very foundation of mental health (Adler et. al., 2017).

Carol Ryff in the early 1980s introduced the concept of psychological well-being through a multidimensional model. According to Ryff's psychological well-being model, psychological well-being is a positive condition that is determined by the existence of six aspects of self-acceptance, autonomy, positive relationship with others, purpose in life, personal growth and environmental mastery, rather than just the absence of distress or psychopathology. Every component makes a distinct contribution to a person's total psychological well-being, underscoring the significance of considering a variety of functional and experiential factors when evaluating and enhancing well-being (Ryff, 1995). The factors that affect the psychological well-being of people had been a major area of focus among the researchers to make the psychological well-being better and it was easily understood that stress plays a major role in the deterioration of psychological well-being of human beings across age and culture (Moatamedy et. al., 2018; Moeini et. al., 2008; Siddique & D'Arcy, 1984). The research literature thereby directs us to ponder onto the different types of stressors that could be influencing the psychological well-being of people during different periods of their life.

Early adulthood is a transition period where an individual begins to play a number of roles together all at once. Becoming a partner and a parent along with their occupational roles and family responsibilities become heavy for any individual to carry with ease. A shift in the attitude of people to take up the roles of partner and parent has changed from the early 1900s (Liefbroer, 1999). But still, it is evident that the Indian culture has a strong social compulsion over the young adults to engage in the system of marriage and childbearing even when there is resistance visible in recent years (Bhagat, 2016; Bhargava, 2022). Parenting is majorly considered as a function of social reproduction. (McLanahan & Adams, 1987). While the idea of becoming a parent stress out most of the people, focusing on the stress experienced by the young adults during the pregnancy period becomes an interesting and necessary topic to ponder on.

Previously, being a parent was a crucial aspect of an adult's self-image, with their life often considered incomplete until they assumed the role of a parent (McLanahan & Adams, 1987). None of the individual difficulties of becoming a parent were a matter of discussion or occurred anywhere in the discourses until the recent years. The shift in the work culture with increased representation of female employees changed the scenario entirely. The work-life balance became difficult for people irrespective of gender (Abela & Walker, 2013) and their identity got entangled with their individual happiness and career related successes, making the entire concept of being a parent a choice (Su, 2012). Discussions around the loss of

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personal space and individual life through the process of parenting was well accepted along with the gender inequality in the responsibilities over parenting. Mothering which was always explained as a noble life experience started to be discussed as a burden in the current times (Abela & Walker, 2013). The lens through which people dared to look at the realities of the lived experiences of parents is now becoming the common perspective towards parenting. The carrying of sociocultural pressure, financial pressure, mental pressure and physical pressure related to parenting by a person along with the reducing subjective benefits of their choice makes it difficult for the young adults to take the call which finally ends up in parental anxiety and related stress, as reproduction is the law of nature at the end of the day (McLanahan & Adams, 1987). This cognitive shift towards parenting is expected to steadily push the parental stress and anxiety of expectant parents beyond doubt.

Liking towards children is a concept that has not been much discussed in the research literature. The liking towards children, irrespective of the child being their own or not, can be expected to be a factor that influences the positive attitude of people towards becoming a parent. If this basic liking towards children can help the young adults to deal better with the anxiety and the stress related to parenting, enhancing the liking towards children can be a way to solve the issue of concern. Personal experiences and learned experiences play an important role in developing attitudes towards anything which finally will be the way a person feels, behaves and thinks about the same (Edwards, 1990). Taking the population of expectant parents of the current period into consideration, the present study tried to answer the same questions. The study aimed at understanding the role of liking towards children in the development of stress experienced by expectant parents during their pregnancy period which could be influencing their psychological well-being. Gender differences in the experience of perceived stress has been part of different research studies with varying conclusions being made (Wikman et. al., 1993). Thereby, the current study tries to investigate the differences in the experiences of expectant fathers and mothers separately.

Objectives

The major objective of the study is to understand if the attitude towards children impacts the perceived stress and psychological well-being of expectant parents.

Hypotheses

- There is no significant relationship between attitude towards children, perceived stress and psychological well-being of expectant fathers and mothers.
- There is no significant difference in the attitude towards children among expectant fathers and mothers.
- There is no significant difference in the perceived stress among expectant fathers and mothers.
- There is no significant difference in psychological well-being of expectant fathers and mothers.

Need and Significance of the Study

The overall well-being of an individual has been accepted and considered as the major life goal of people over the years of understanding life from a psychological and developmental perspective. Stress is considered as one among the major factors that influence the quality of life of people. Life opens with different critical transition periods which are potent enough to induce stress, and the way people perceive and deal with it defines how it influences the

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individuals' life. Becoming a parent is such a major transition period in a person's life and no matter how well prepared they are, life experiences must reveal the dynamics of dealing effectively with the circumstances of life. Research works have been trying to support this population in understanding their lived experiences better and trying to provide better ways of dealing effectively with the transition. Factors affecting the well-being of expectant parents which fall under the category of controllable factors can be of great help for the population to experience an easy transition. Overall, studying the impact of attitudes towards children on the perceived stress and psychological well-being of expectant parents is significant for enhancing our understanding of the prenatal period and for identifying ways to support expectant parents as they navigate the transition to parenthood. It contributes to the broader field of perinatal psychology and informs the development of interventions aimed at promoting the well-being of both parents and children.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The population of the study were married couples who were pregnant and expecting a baby soon. The number of months of pregnancy was not considered as any criterion for selecting the sample. Any expectant parents belonging to the age group of 22 to 35 years were considered as the sample for this study. Data was collected from 30 male and 30 female expectant parents making a total sample size of 60. The sample consisted only of people from India, thereby excluding every other possibility. Samples for the study were selected using purposive sampling, convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods.

Instruments

Three different tools as explained below were used to collect information regarding the three different variables of concern along with a personal data sheet that collected the socio-demographic details of the participants.

- 1. Affect Balance Scale:** The scale was developed by Bradburn in 2015 and has been extensively used to quantitatively measure the Psychological Well-Being of people. The scale also had the capacity to individually measure the Positive affect and Negative affect experienced by the participants separately. The scale was a 10-item scale with its response pattern being 5-point Likert. The scale consisted of 2 subscales with 5 items each which exclusively focused on the Positive affect and Negative affect. These individual subscale scores were added together, and the overall negative affect score was subtracted from the overall positive affect score to obtain the Psychological well-being score of the participants. The internal consistency reliability of the scale has been found to be higher than .80 (Bradburn, 2015), along with the convergent validity score being high (Lewis et. al., 2000) which makes the test reliable and valid to measure the psychological well-being of people.
- 2. Barnett Liking of Children Scale (BLOCS):** The scale was a 14-item scale developed by Barnett & Sinisi (1990) to assess the extent to which people have a favourable attitude towards children. The BLOCS is considered to be a useful tool for analysing how a person's inclination to like or detest children may affect how they interact with them in a variety of contexts, including education and maltreatment of children. The scale is a 7-point Likert scale with the responses varying from 1 to 7, making the obtainable range of scores being 14 to 98. According to Duyan & Gelbal (2008), the scale is said to have a test-retest reliability of .854 making the test reliable enough. The authors made a Turkish adaptation of the study

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and that was found to have a Cronbach's alpha score of .92, confirming the reliability of the scale. The test was also mentioned to have a good validity score by the researchers (Yazici, 2014).

- 3. Perceived Stress Scale:** The scale was developed by Cohen et. al. (1983) and aimed at measuring people's perception of stress. Basically, the scale contained a series of 10 items with a 5-point Likert pattern that helps to understand how erratic, unmanageable, and hectic the lives of the respondents are. Each item is scored between 0 to 4, making the maximum obtainable score 40 with the minimum being 0. The scale is a widely used one in the field of psychology and is said to have good reliability and validity. The validity of the scale is said to be high as there is a strong correlation between the scores obtained through the PSS scale and other questionnaires like Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS). The sub-dimensions of DASS correlate at an r value greater than .5 with the PSS scores. The Cronbach's alpha value of the study is also found to be .82 making the test highly reliable (Andreou et. al., 2011).

Procedure

Data was collected from the participants with the help of google forms where the participants were asked to fill out the personal data sheet and then go forward with the three different scales used in the study. The entire research was conducted by strictly abiding to the ethical guidelines of research. The participants were informed prior that the collected data will be maintained confidential and will be used only for research purposes. Data was collected with their consent, and they had all the rights to back out at any point they felt uncomfortable. The collected data was scored appropriately, coded and analysed statistically using SPSS version 25.

RESULTS

The major aim of the present study was to understand the relationships between the attitude towards children, perceived stress and psychological well-being of expectant parents. The normality of the data was checked with the help of statistical tests like Shapiro-Wilk test, Kolmogrov-Smirnov test, skewness and kurtosis. The results of all the tests helped to understand that the data is normally distributed and thereby Karl Pearson's test for correlation and independent sample t-tests were conducted to test the hypotheses and reach the necessary conclusion for the study.

Table No. 1: Table representing correlation between psychological well-being, attitude towards children and perceived stress among expectant parents.

Variables	1	2	3
1. Psychological well-being	-		
2. Attitude towards children	.215	-	
3. Perceived stress	-.365**	-.182	-

$N = 60$, ** $p < 0.01$

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Table No. 2: Table representing correlation between psychological well-being and perceived stress among expectant fathers

Variables	1	2	3
1. Psychological well-being	-		
2. Attitude towards children	.173	-	
3. Perceived stress	-.417**	-.218	-

N = 30, ***p* < 0.01

Table No. 3: Table representing correlation between psychological well-being and perceived stress among expectant mothers

Variables	1	2	3
1. Psychological well-being	-		
2. Attitude towards children	.260		
3. Perceived stress	-.338**	-.162	-

N = 30, ***p* < 0.01

To understand the relationship between psychological well-being, attitude towards children and perceived stress, Pearson's correlation was conducted, and the results are reported in Table 1. It is evident from the results that there is no significant correlation for attitude towards children with psychological well-being ($r = .215, p > .05$) or perceived stress ($r = -.182, p > .05$). On the other hand, it was evident that the correlation between psychological well-being and perceived stress among the expectant parents are significantly negative with a lower strength ($r = -.365, p < .05$). To understand if there is any gender difference in the correlation between psychological well-being and perceived stress, individual correlations were done on male and female expectant parents separately and the results have been mentioned in Table 2 and Table 3. The results reveal that the significant negative correlation is present among both the groups with the strength of the correlation being slightly stronger among expectant fathers ($r = -.417, p < .05$) when compared with the expectant mothers ($r = -.338, p < .05$). From the entire set of correlations, it shows a trend that the attitude towards children might be having a positive relationship with psychological well-being and a negative relationship with perceived stress, but none of these can be generalized onto the population as the results are insignificant. It must be concluded that attitude towards children do not play a role in the perceived stress and psychological well-being of expectant parents.

Table No. 4: Linear regression predicting psychological well-being of expectant parents by perceived stress

	B	SE B	β
Constant	4.16	.640	-.365**
Perceived Stress	-.097	.033	

*Note: R*² = .133, ***p* < .01, *N* = 60

To know the extent to which perceived stress predicts the psychological well-being of expectant parents, a linear regression analysis was done, and the results have been tabulated in Table 4. The table depicts that perceived stress significantly predicts the psychological well-being of expectant parents by 13.3 percent ($R^2 = .133, p < .01$). This clarifies that with a unit increase in perceived stress there is a decrease in psychological well-being by .365 units ($\beta = -.365, p < 0.01$). This clearly shows the impact of perceived stress on the psychological well-being of expectant parents.

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Table No. 5: Table representing t-test on psychological well-being, perceived stress and attitude towards children among expectant fathers and mothers.

Grouping variable Dependent variable	Expectant fathers			Expectant mothers			t-value	p
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD		
Perceived stress	30	17.933	5.545	30	19.233	6.961	.800	.427
Psychological well-being	30	2.300	1.764	30	2.400	1.610	.299	.819
Attitude towards children	30	84.56	10.30	30	83.67	10.65	.323	.748

The role of gender within the variables of concern has been given importance in the study and to understand this gender difference, independent sample t-tests were conducted. It is clear from the results mentioned in Table 5 that there is no significant gender difference in psychological well-being ($t = .299, p > .05$), perceived stress ($t = .800, p > .05$) or attitude towards children ($t = .323, p > .05$). This gives a clear understanding that psychological well-being, perceived stress and attitude towards children do not differ among expectant fathers and mothers.

DISCUSSION

The major aim of the current study was to understand if there is any relationship between attitude towards children, perceived stress and psychological well-being of expectant mothers and expectant fathers. Studies were conducted earlier to understand the factors that influence the parental stress of people with most of the studies focusing on the factors like social support (Fang et. Al., 2024), marital satisfaction (Robinson & Neece, 2015) and socioeconomic status (Weaver & Cranley, 1983). Attitude towards children or liking towards children was not found to be part of any of the research studies in the literature which led to the development of the current study. The statistical results of the study indicate that there is a significant negative correlation between psychological well-being and perceived stress among expectant parents where the perceived stress negatively predicts the psychological well-being. This has been a general understanding that psychological well-being is highly influenced by the different types of stress experienced by people across different age groups and cultural backgrounds (Skreden et. al., 2012; Li & Hasson, 2020; Malik et. al., 2020, Srivastav, 2021). The same has been visible in the case of expectant parents which makes it important to find ways to control their stress to enhance their psychological well-being. The study has focused on perceived stress and not particularly parental stress so that it could include all the different types of stress that the expectant parents would be undergoing during the crucial period of pregnancy. There has been research findings which also suggest that when the parental stress increases, there is an increased chance for the development of an authoritarian parenting style (Vafaeenejad et. al., 2019). The strength of the correlation must be taken into consideration as it deals with the psychological well-being of expectant parents. Proper information about stress management

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and its effects on the health of parents must be delivered to every parent from the early stages of pregnancy to help them deal with their personal and parenting life better.

When a gender perspective is taken into the scenario, it is evident from Table 2 and Table 3 that the negative relationship between the variables is slightly stronger among the expectant fathers when compared to the expectant mothers. The slightly higher impact of perceived stress on psychological well-being of expectant fathers could suggest the lack of proper stress management among men when compared to women, making it important to not only focus on the expectant mothers but also give equal focus on the expectant fathers during their pregnancy period. It should also be discussed at this point that the t-test results revealed that there is no difference in the amount of stress experienced by both the expectant fathers and the expectant mothers. The psychological well-being scores of both the male and female parents have also been found to be similar with no significant difference while the correlation strength between stress and psychological well-being of male and female expectant parents vary. There are differing results reported in the literature with respect to gender in their psychological well-being and amount of stress experienced. Skreden et. al (2012) reported that the mothers experience higher amount of stress and poorer psychological well-being when compared to fathers. A similar understanding of parental stress being higher among mothers was suggested by Hildingsson & Thomas (2014) while Saisto et. al. (2008) reports that the parental stress is higher among the fathers of toddlers when compared to the mothers. These conflicting results must be considered and researched further to understand the role of gender in the experience of parental stress and understand the other factors that play a role in making such differences. The psychological well-being of fathers is said to be getting better after the transition to fatherhood when compared with that of mothers according to the research results of Brandel et. al. (2018), but the current study concludes that there is no difference in the psychological well-being experienced by male and female expectant parents.

The interesting part of this study was to understand the role of attitude towards children, irrespective of the child being their own or of others, on the perceived stress of parents which would be influencing the psychological well-being of the expectant parents. It is evident from the results that attitude towards children do not play a significant role in either perceived stress or psychological well-being of expectant parents. The factor of liking towards children is also found to be the same among the male and female expectant parents with no significant difference which points out that gender plays no role in the factor. Research earlier have also provided evidence that there is no gender difference in the feelings related to being pregnant (Condon, 1985). Even when the behavioural expression of feelings related to pregnancy vary across gender based on the gender role and related stereotypes, the way the expectant parents feel towards it has been found to be similar. The attitude of expectant parents towards pregnancy has been reported to be the same among mothers and fathers through the research study conducted by Wikman et. al. (1993) too. The study also suggests that a condition of ambivalence is experienced by both the male and female parents where they consider having kids both as a restriction to their freedom and also a source of existential satisfaction. The attitude towards children reported by parents could be expected to be the one that comes from the ambivalence experienced by them which seems to be indifferent across gender. This could be the reason why there seems to be no role of the attitude towards children in the perceived stress and thereby the psychological well-being of expectant parents in the current study.

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Even when the correlation results are insignificant, there is a very weak positive correlation between the psychological well-being and attitude towards children of the expectant parents, and a weak negative correlation between attitude towards children and perceived stress. Even though no generalisations can be made from this results, further research could work on a larger population to cross-check the results. The current study anyways concludes that even if the parents like or dislike children, the perceived stress and psychological well-being experienced by the male and female expectant parents remain the same. Attitude towards children do not influence the stress experienced during pregnancy by the parents and thereby do not make any difference in their psychological well-being.

Limitations and future suggestions

The major limitation of the current study was that the study was conducted on a small sample selected through non-probability sampling techniques which would have definitely led to an increase in the chance error of the study. The major correlations of the study have not come out to be significant which brings the necessity to replicate the study on a larger population with better tools in order to cross-check and generalize the results. It is also important to note that the tools used in this study were all in English while the population approached was expectant parents from Kerala whose mother language is different. The effectiveness of the English questionnaires remains doubtful in such a case. Replicating the present study with questionnaires shared in the mother language onto a larger group of people might be helpful to make generalized conclusions regarding the variables of concern as there is very little research literature in this area of interest. Taking a qualitative approach towards the topic would also help in gaining insightful understanding regarding the variables and relationships of concern.

CONCLUSION

The study tried to understand the relationship between parental stress and psychological well-being of expectant mothers and fathers, and also analyzed if attitude towards children played any role in relation to the said variables. The study concluded that there is a significant negative relationship between psychological well-being and parental stress of expectant parents which reveals to be stronger in the case of fathers when compared to mothers. The study also shows that attitude towards children is not related to the perceived stress and psychological well-being of expectant parents.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest has been reported between the authors of the study.

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