

Effect of presence and absence of parents on the emotional maturity and perceived loneliness in adolescents

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ABSTRACT



The present study was conducted to examine the Emotional Maturity and Perceived Loneliness of adolescents with respect to the presence and absence of parents. It was hypothesized that the absence or presence of parents of adolescents would affect the level of emotional maturity and perceived loneliness among adolescents. The adolescent participants N=250 (males n=125 and females n=125; age range= 13-18; M=16.63; SD=0.87) were approached through purposive convenient sampling technique. Measures included the Emotional Maturity Scale and the UCLA loneliness scale V-III. Results indicated that adolescent who lived with their guardians had greater perceived loneliness than those who lived with their parents. However, adolescents who were living with their parents had lower Emotional Maturity. A significant negative but weak/moderate relationship was found between Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity ($r=-.28$). The findings of this study can be useful in clinical settings to counsel adolescents who are facing conflicts with step- or absent- parents, or feel lonely in the presence of their parents as well as in therapies and have disrupted levels of emotional maturity. Moreover, it can benefit the psychological community by providing the opportunity to find solutions to relevant problems.

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Introduction

The primary role of parents in the family environment is to prepare children for adulthood through rules, discipline, and support [1]. Adolescence is the period when children begin to learn about the real world and strive to become integral members of social groups, though often struggling to establish their own independence [2]. Adolescence is sometimes a turbulent period: teens are often unable to discuss their thoughts and feelings with adults, yet they also wish to explore and experience untried things [3,4]. Various studies have emphasized the importance of parental presence in the life of adolescents, as they need the experienced and reliable support of parents who can provide for their basic psychological and physical necessities.

Effect of absence or presence of parents in life of adolescents

Parents not only encourage and enhance the child's personality but also influence their psychosocial

development. Children and adolescents who live with both biological parents tend to have a more stable level of well-being, whereas those in single parent families have a lower level of well-being during both childhood and adulthood [5]. The experience of losing a parent can have an intense effect on the psychological development of a child. Children in single parent homes may develop a sense of insecurity, feel alone, and show immaturity in their behavior. In so doing, they are often less prepared to adapt to the demands of society and at emotional regulation.

Emotional maturity

Emotional maturity represents the ability of people to check and manage their emotions, to assess the emotional state of other individuals, and to exert control over their own judgment and actions [6,7]. The theory of emotional maturity by Franz Alexander posits that individuals reach psychological maturity only when they attain a specific level of intellectual formation and can maintain a certain level of emotional outlook [8]. The relationship between parents and adolescents is reflected as a feature of

social/emotional development. According to one study, emotional immaturity can lead to feelings of loneliness among adolescents, and emotional immaturity and loneliness together can influence the person's satisfaction with life [9]. Specifically, an emotionally immature person tends to feel lonelier and has less ability to regulate emotions than emotionally mature counterparts.

Perceived loneliness

Loneliness can be defined as a disturbing experience felt by individuals when they perceive their social relationships to be less in quality, and quantity, than desired [10]. Weiss has suggested that an absence of social skills may be associated with loneliness. Individuals who have particular deficits in their relationships may experience different forms of loneliness: emotional or social loneliness [11]. The theory of loneliness suggests that insufficient requirement of specific social relationships can bring about specific kind of feelings of loneliness. For example, if there is an absence of attachment with a trustworthy adult for the adolescent, the adolescent may develop emotional loneliness along with anxiety and insecurity. These needs in adolescents are typically taken care of by the parents, as they are a reliable source of support as they provide nurturance to their children.

Significance and rationale of the study

This study intends to assess the differences in emotional maturity of adolescents as a result of parental status in the home. Limited research has examined this relationship, especially in the context of a culture such as Pakistan. Being a collectivistic society, parents in Pakistan have the major role of contributing to the healthy development of their adolescent children. At the same time, they are sometimes overinvolved in their children's triumphs and failures, which can have both positive and negative consequences.

Adolescence is a vulnerable age during the development of an individual, being a time that is simultaneously stressful and exciting and that requires oversight from parents. This stage of life is both socially significant and psychologically complex. Encouragement and reinforcement from parents are crucial for adolescents and, if not present, can lead to various psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and low self-confidence [12]. Although the relationship between emotional maturity and perceived loneliness has been established in previous research, the current study investigates the role of parental presence on this relationship, findings of potential relevance to the well-being of adolescents in the indigenous culture of Pakistan.

Study Objectives

This study aimed to (1) determine differences in the Emotional Maturity and Perceived Loneliness among adolescents in relation to parental status; (2) determine the general correlation between emotional maturity and

loneliness; and (3) to assess whether effects were different for male vs female adolescents.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The sample, recruited through purposive convenient sampling, was comprised of 250 adolescents (Males n=125 and Females n=125), ages 13-18 years (M=16.63, SD=0.87). Participants were approached at different schools, colleges, institutes, and universities in Karachi, Pakistan. Two groups were made differentiating adolescents who have both parents from those who do not.

Inclusion criteria

Children who fell into the following categories were included in the survey research: Adolescents aged 13 to 18 years; living with both of their parents, one parent, guardian, or other (aunt or uncle); studying in school, college, or university, from grade 8 to 2 semester college. Table 1 shows demographic characteristics of the study sample.

Measures

Informed consent form. Participants were required to sign an informed consent form before proceeding with the study. Participants were briefly informed about the purpose of the research, confidentiality of their information, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Demographic form. Information about the participants' basic profile was collected, including age, gender, family structure, family history, and education history.

Emotional Maturity Scale (EMS). This scale, developed by Singh and Bharagava, has 48 items assessed on a 5-point response scale which measure emotional maturity using five dimensions: Emotional instability, Emotional regression, Social maladjustment, Personality disintegration, and Lack of independence [13]. A total score was calculated by adding the scores of all five dimensions, with higher scores indicating greater emotional immaturity. The psychometric properties of the scale demonstrate overall reliability of 0.75. Internal consistency for subscales was as follows: Emotional stability, 0.75, Emotional progression, 0.63, Social adjustment, 0.58, Personality integration, 0.86 and Independence, 0.42. The scale was also validated against external criteria using the area of adjustment inventory for college students [14,15].

University of California Los Angeles Loneliness scale UCLA (version III). This 4-point self-reporting scale has 20 items which measure subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Items 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19 & 20 in scale were reversed and the scores of all the items was added together. Higher scores indicated greater loneliness. Test-retest reliability for this scale is 0.73 (over a 1-year period), and internal consistency ranged from 0.89 to 0.94. Convergence was indicated by significant correlations with other measures of loneliness [16,17].

Table 1. Frequency and percentages of Demographic characteristics of the study sample (N=250)

Characteristics	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Age		16.63 (0.87)
Monthly family income		86327
Number of dependents on		4.70 (1.84)
Number of Family		5.78 (1.83)
Number of Siblings		3.83 (1.74)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	125 (50)	
Female	125 (50)	
<i>Institute name</i>		
Private	119 (48)	
Government	130 (52)	
<i>Family system</i>		
Nuclear	176 (70.4)	
Joint	74 (29.6)	
<i>Birth order</i>		
Only child	20 (8.0)	
First child	97 (38.8)	
Middle child	83 (33.2)	
Last child	50 (20.0)	
<i>Marital status of parents</i>		
Married	209 (83.6)	
Widowed	16 (6.4)	
Divorced	15 (6.0)	
Separated	6 (2.4)	
Others	4 (1.6)	
<i>Head of the Family</i>		
Father	216 (86.4)	
Mother	21 (8.4)	
Grandfather	4 (1.6)	
Grandmother	1 (0.4)	
Uncle	7 (2.8)	
<i>Living status</i>		
Both parent	208 (83.2)	
Single parent	31 (12.4)	
Guardian	6 (2.4)	
Step parent	3 (1.2)	
<i>Presence of step siblings</i>		
Yes	3 (1.2)	
No	3 (1.2)	
<i>Living status with step siblings</i>		
Yes	3 (1.2)	
No	3 (1.2)	

Procedure

Permission to use the various scales was obtained from respective authors. For recruiting participants, authorities of schools (secondary section), colleges, and universities were provided with a formal permission letter issued by the Institute of Professional Psychology, Bahria University Karachi.

Data collection was begun at different assigned dates decided by the authority of schools and universities. The final sample of 250 participants ranged in age from 13 to 18 and was drawn from a variety of institute levels and departments.

Following a description and purpose of the study, informed consent was obtained. Participants were also assured about the confidentiality of their identity, personal information, findings, and responses. Demographic information was collected first, after which participants were requested to read the instructions carefully for each test before completing the items; assistance with instructions was provided as needed. Participants sat comfortably in quiet/calm conditions, interruptions were minimized, and approximately 10-15 minutes was allotted for each questionnaire. Once completed, forms were collected and participants were debriefed. Gratitude was extended to the participants for their cooperation and participation. Data were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics for the overall sample for the Loneliness and Emotional Maturity scales are given in Table 2. The alpha reliability of the Emotional maturity scale is 0.77 and UCLA loneliness scale is 0.42 respectively. Data were normally distributed and reliabilities of the scales and subscales fell into an acceptable range.

Prevalence of Perceived loneliness and Emotional Maturity in adolescents.

The prevalence of Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity in Pakistani adolescents was calculated. Perceived loneliness was divided into three categories: Low (20-40), Moderate (41-60), and High (61-80). Similarly, Emotional Maturity was divided into three categories: Low (197-240), Moderate (123-196), and High (48-122). The results, given in Table 3, show that of 250 adolescents, 33 reported low perceived loneliness, 207 moderate loneliness, and 10 high loneliness. For Emotional Maturity, 3 adolescents reported low emotional maturity, 235 moderate emotional maturity, and 10 high emotional Maturity.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and alpha reliability coefficients, univariate normality of study variables (N=250)

Variables	Items	<i>a</i>	M	SD	SK	K	Range	
							Actual	Potential
LON	20	.42	49.10	8.04	1.04	5.16	32-96	20-80
EM	48	.77	151.82	19.02	.60	.10	109-210	48-240
EI	10	.46	31.63	5.69	.14	.40	15-47	10-40
ER	10	.45	32.36	5.58	.40	.31	17-48	10-40
PD	10	.40	32.67	5.31	.48	.15	20-48	10-40
LI	8	.03	22.55	3.52	-.20	.23	10-32	7-28
SM	10	.37	32.48	5.28	.52	-.07	20-47	10-40

Note. LON= Loneliness, EM= Emotional Maturity, EI= Emotional Instability, ER= Emotional Regression, PD= Personality Disintegration, LI= Lack of Independence, SM= Social Maladjustment, SK= Skewness, K= Kurtosis.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of Perceived Loneliness (Low, Moderate and High) and Emotional Maturity (Low, Moderate and High) of Adolescents (N=250)

	<i>f</i>	%
Loneliness		
Low	33	13.2
Moderate	207	82.8
High	10	4
Emotional maturity		
Low	3	1.2
Moderate	235	94
High	10	4

Difference in Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity Related to Presence of Parents.

Independent t-test was conducted to determine the effect of parental status on emotional maturity and loneliness, followed by ANOVA to specify location of specific differences (adolescents living with parents, single parent, guardian, or stepparent) (Table 4 and 5). The results revealed that adolescents living with parents were less mature than adolescents living without both parents. However, adolescents living with parents have lower loneliness compared to the adolescents living

without both parents. Cohen suggested that values of 0.50 generally indicate sizable effects for both emotional maturity and loneliness [18].

In addition, results revealed that adolescents who were living with their guardian had greater Perceived Loneliness than those who were living with their parents (Table 5). And adolescents who were living with their parents had low Emotional Maturity compared to those living with their step parents or a single parent.

Co-relational Analysis between Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity

A Pearson correlation explored the relationship between Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity and its five subscales: Emotional Instability, Emotional Regression, Social Maladjustment, Personality Disintegration, and Lack of Independence) (Table 6). A significant negative weak/moderate relationship was found between Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity ($r=-0.28$). Perceived loneliness had significant but only weak/moderate relationships with the subscales: emotional instability ($r=-.23$), emotional regression ($r=-.26$), personality disintegration ($r=-.21$), social maladjustment ($r=-.22$), and lack of independence ($r=-.06$).

Relationship between gender of participant and Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity

Table 7 shows that gender was not significantly related to differences in perceived loneliness and emotional maturity, indicating that this factor was not an important covariate for the overall relationships between loneliness and emotional maturity.

Table 4. Mean standard deviation and t-value for adolescents living with parents and without parents on Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity (N=250)

Variables	Parents (n=209)		Without both parents (n=41)		t(248)	p	95%CL		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
LON	48.50	8.19	52.12	6.51	-3.10	0.003	-5.94	-1.28	.51
EM	153.53	18.72	143.19	18.36	3.23	0.001	4.05	16.62	.56

Note. CI=Confidence interval, LL= Lower Limit, UL= Upper Limit, LON= Perceived Loneliness, EM= Emotional Maturity

Table 5. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for Presence and Absence of Parents on Emotion Maturity and Perceived Loneliness (N=250)

Variables	Both Parents (n=209)		Single Parent (n=31)		Guardian (n=6)		Step Parent (n=4)		F	η ²	i-j	MeanD (i-j)	SE	95% CL	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD						LL	UL
	LON	48.5	8.19	51.25	5.97	56.33	4.32	52.5						11.61	3.04**
EM	153.53	18.72	144.8	20.22	140.83	9.84	134.25	9.97	3.9**	0.04	BothParent< SingleParent	8.72	3.60	-1.16	-15.81
											BothParent< StepParent	9.28	9.43	0.68	37.87

Note. CI= Confidence Interval, LL= Lower limit, UL= Upper limit, LON= Loneliness, EM= Emotional Maturity

Table 6. Correlational Analysis between Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity and Subscales

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Loneliness	-	-.28**	-.23**	-.26**	-.22**	-.21**	-.06
2 Emotional Maturity		-	.76**	.79**	.72**	.81**	.59**
3 Emotional Instability			-	.63**	.32**	.45**	.30**
4 Emotional Regression				-	.37**	.56**	.26**
5 Social Maladjustment					-	.55**	.45**
6 Personality Disintegration						-	.41**
7 Lack of Independence							-

Table 7. Mean standard deviation and t-value for Gender (male & female) on Perceived Loneliness and Emotional Maturity (N=250)

Variables	Male (n=125)		Female (n=125)		t (248)	p	95%CL		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
LON	48.71	8.59	49.48	19.38	-0.76	0.44	-2.78	1.23	0.05
EM	152.78	7.47	150.86	18.68	0.79	0.42	-2.84	6.68	0.13

Note. CI=Confidence interval, LL= Lower Limit, UL= Upper Limit, LON= Perceived Loneliness, EM= Emotional Maturity

Discussions

Our results indicate that perceived loneliness and emotional maturity are associated with parental status, i.e., adolescents who were living with their guardian had greater perceived loneliness than those who were living with their parents. However, adolescents who were living with their parents had lower emotional maturity compared to the adolescents living with step parents or single parents. Moreover, there was a weak/moderate negative correlation between emotional maturity and perceived loneliness among adolescents.

Emotional maturity is a phase of personality development related to biological and psychological maturation. Individuals are considered emotionally mature when they are able to regulate their emotions. Emotional maturity is not only related to personality characteristics but it also enables positive adolescent development [19,20]. In Asian cultures, for example in Pakistan, emotional maturity assumes control over ones' emotions rather than revealing them or acting them out. Our study revealed differences in emotional maturity of adolescents related to the presence or absence of both parents. Our results indicate that adolescents whose both parents are present are less emotionally mature compared to those whose parental status is different. Such findings suggest that in the absence of parents, adolescents have to face life challenges on their own, often taking responsibility for the positive or negative consequences. In contrast, in Pakistani culture, adolescents often share their feelings with their parents and seek guidance from them, but this close relationship between parents and the young adult may also serve to buffer them from pressures and problems. As a consequence, their emotional maturity may not develop as quickly. Although adolescents need the support of their parents, this support may become invasive, with parents becoming too involved in the affairs of their children. That is, while adolescents want the support of their parents, they may not appreciate their overinvolvement, particularly when parents closely monitor and have strong bearings over their children's life [21].

Researchers have defined loneliness as the unpleasant feeling when people perceive their social relationships to be insufficient in a quantitative or qualitative way. The perception of loneliness is different for every individual, depending on their circumstances and personality [22,23]. Relevant to the current study, in Asian cultures parents are often over-engaged with their children's affairs, leading the adolescent to disengage in order to establish themselves as being independent of their parents—yet still needing them during challenging times. In fact, perceived parental support is a key protective factor for adolescents' mental health during a developmental period when they often feel high levels of distress [24,25]. Loneliness occurs when

children with insecure attachment patterns behave in ways that cause rejection by their peers. Those rejections make their development of social skills difficult and increase their distrust of other people, thereby fostering ongoing loneliness [26].

We hypothesized that levels of emotional maturity and perceived loneliness will differ among adolescents in home environments having different parental status. In the cultural context of Pakistan, parents play a vital role in the shaping of the personalities of their growing adolescents, and thus they require strong emotional support from parents. The absence of parents actually improves emotional maturity but also leads adolescents toward feelings of loneliness, not surprising in the absence of strong emotional support [27,28]. Such children may feel the need to compensate by seeking social support from other sources and may find fulfillment of needs from their environment, also accounting for their greater emotional maturity.

Adolescents living with guardians experience greater loneliness than those living with both their parents. In Pakistani culture, during adolescence, individuals are often readier to confront and show disagreement with their parents. It may be that a guardian is less likely to understand and manage the adolescent's issues in the same way that parents can. Despite these differences, divorce has been shown to decrease a child's future competence in many areas of life, including family relationships, education, emotional well-being, self-integration and personality building. However, whether the poorer adjustment is due to the divorce per se, or to the lack of a biparental home is unclear.

Correlational analysis between perceived loneliness and emotional maturity showed a significant negative but weak relationship between perceived loneliness and emotional maturity, as well as with all the emotional maturity subscales. These negative relationships might be explained by the protective environment associated with biparental homes, where adolescents often have little room to explore and substantial restriction on their decision making. As such, while they are less lonely, they are also less likely to develop independence and emotional maturity, as is seen to occur in single parent/guardian families.

Finally, the results revealed that the associations between loneliness and emotional maturity were largely independent of the sex of the participant. That is, whether male or female, loneliness and emotional maturity were similar. The traditional assumption that adolescent girls show emotional maturity earlier than adolescent boys was not apparent in our sample. This lack of difference may result from the traditionally strong family environment in Pakistan, where both sexes tend to be equally pampered

[29-31]. Such cultural differences are noteworthy, given that few studies have investigated such relationships in non-Western samples. However, further research is needed to confirm such patterns of loneliness and emotional maturity in other non-Western cultures.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated a significant but weak/moderate negative relationship between emotional maturity and perceived loneliness; however, a significant difference was found in emotional regulation and loneliness that was associated with the parental status of the household. These findings suggest that parental presence and the support it provides may have both positive and negative effects on adolescents' social and emotional development.

Conflict of interest disclosure

There are no known conflicts of interest in the publication of this article. The manuscript was read and approved by all authors.

Compliance with ethical standards

Any aspect of the work covered in this manuscript has been conducted with the ethical approval of all relevant bodies and that such approvals are acknowledged within the manuscript.

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