

Impact of Family Dynamics on Wellbeing: Insights from Indian Young Adults

Niruktha Vadlamudi¹

Abstract

Family dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping the overall well-being of individuals. As young adults navigate this period of identity formation, their emotional and psychological health is significantly influenced by the interactions and structures within their familial environment. This paper explores how family dynamics affect the well-being of young adults. It draws insights from the young adults residents of Andhra Pradesh to understand how familial relationships, societal expectations, and cultural norms, shape emotional and psychological outcomes. The data was collected from 12 students (6 males and 6 females) between the ages of 18 - 25 years, through semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences; and thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes. Participants were selected through convenience sampling. This study underscores the profound impact of family dynamics on the well-being of Indian young adults, highlighting the interplay between parental influence, gender norms, emotional expression, and financial independence. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges young adults face, offering important insights for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals in creating more supportive and equitable environments.

Keywords: Young adults, family dynamics, well-being, qualitative study, thematic analysis

¹Department of Psychology, SRM University, A.P

Family dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping the overall well-being of individuals, particularly during the transformative years of young adulthood. As young adults navigate this critical period of identity formation, their emotional and psychological health is significantly influenced by the interactions and structures within their familial environment (Roustit et al., 2011). This paper explores the impact of family dynamics on well-being, drawing insights from Indian young adults to uncover how familial relationships, societal expectations, and cultural norms intersect to shape emotional and psychological outcomes.

In the Indian context, family dynamics are deeply embedded in cultural and societal frameworks, often influenced by patriarchal norms that govern decision-making, gender roles, and interpersonal relationships (Halfon et al., 2018). Patriarchy, with its historical roots in the control of resources and reproduction, has shaped familial structures in ways that continue to affect the emotional development and well-being of young adults. For instance, the male dominance of resources and decision-making, combined with the ideological reinforcement of gendered roles, perpetuates systemic inequities within families (Ramos & Vasconcelos, 2021). Such cultural underpinnings continue to influence family interactions, particularly in societies where traditional norms are highly valued.

The psychological ramifications of these dynamics are profound. Parental control, decision-making hierarchies, and gendered expectations can stifle the emotional expression and personal autonomy of young adults. Women, for instance, may internalize messages that devalue their worth outside domestic roles, leading to self-doubt and emotional repression (Rudman, 1998). Similarly, men may face pressure to conform to stoic and dominant archetypes, limiting their ability to develop emotional resilience and authentic connections within their families (Rudman, 1998).

Research has consistently shown that family dynamics are key determinants of emotional well-being (Turunen, 2013). Patterns of communication, parental involvement, and the handling of conflicts within families have been linked to mental health outcomes (Cripps & Zyromski, (2009), stress levels (Cripps & Zyromski, (2009), and coping mechanisms in young adults (Putri & Dariyo, 2023). For example, families that encourage open dialogue and mutual respect foster greater emotional stability and resilience, whereas those that adhere to rigid hierarchies and suppress dissent may hinder emotional growth.

This study focuses on Indian young adults, a demographic uniquely positioned at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. As they navigate familial expectations shaped by longstanding cultural norms, they also contend with the influences of a rapidly globalizing society. These dual pressures present a compelling framework to examine how family dynamics impact their emotional and psychological well-being. By exploring these themes, this paper seeks to provide insights into the ways in which familial interactions, shaped by societal and cultural norms, influence the well-being of young adults. It also aims to highlight strategies to foster healthier family environments, with implications for policy, education, and mental health interventions. Recognizing the complexities of family dynamics in the Indian context is essential for promoting holistic well-being and creating supportive ecosystems for young adults.

Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Evidence

Existing research and theoretical frameworks highlight multiple factors that influence family relationships, including parental involvement, interparental conflict, socio-economic conditions, and gender norms. Foremost, Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) posits that early bonding with caregivers influences emotional development and mental health outcomes. Secure attachment fosters resilience and positive social relationships, whereas insecure attachment can lead to emotional instability. This framework is particularly relevant in the

Indian context where strong familial ties shape young adults' psychological well-being.

Another relevant perspective is Family Systems Theory (Minuchin, 1974), which examines how family interactions and hierarchies affect individual development. Indian families often operate within rigid hierarchical structures, where parental authority dictates decision-making predominantly influencing major life choices. Additionally, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a macro-level understanding of family influences. It suggests that well-being is shaped by multiple layers of influence, including family, society, and cultural norms. This theory supports the need to consider the broader social expectations and patriarchal norms that influence family dynamics in India.

Tafà et al. (2022) examined how different family structures impact parent-adolescent relationships. They found that the quality of parenting, family functioning, and economic stability were significant determinants of adolescent well-being. While traditional two-parent households provided stability, single-parent and non-heteronormative families did not necessarily have a negative impact, as long as emotional bonds were strong. This challenges societal misconceptions that non-traditional families inherently harm children's well-being. In the Indian context, where traditional family structures dominate, understanding how familial support compensates for structural variations is crucial. Lazarevic et al. (2020) explored how family dynamics influenced Latino young adults' ability to cope with discrimination. They found that positive family interactions acted as a protective factor, reducing depression and increasing life satisfaction, while negative family dynamics exacerbated stress. The study suggests that family support is essential in helping young adults navigate stressors, similarly, in India, families that maintain strong emotional connections may help buffer young adults from external societal pressures, including gender discrimination and rigid cultural expectations. Lamb (2021) emphasized that the quality of parent-child relationships is a critical factor in psychological adjustment. He identified three

key influences—the quality of relationships between children and parents, which determines emotional stability; interparental relationships, where conflict negatively affects children, while supportive parental relationships enhance well-being; economic and social resources, where financial stability fosters emotional security, whereas economic hardships contribute to stress and maladjustment. Kennison et al. (2016) examined how childhood parental relationships influenced young adults' risk-taking behaviors. They found that negative interactions with parents increased the likelihood of financial and ethical risk-taking, particularly among men. Women, on the other hand, were influenced by low maternal warmth and paternal neglect, leading to higher susceptibility to ethical risk-taking. These findings suggest that the emotional environment within the family significantly impacts behavioral tendencies. Cripps & Zyromski (2015) reviewed decades of research on parental involvement and psychological well-being in adolescents suggesting that emotionally expressive families foster healthier psychological development, whereas controlling or emotionally distant parental behavior can lead to suppressed emotions and self-doubt. The study also supports the notion that authoritative parenting styles, which balance warmth with structure, contribute to greater emotional maturity in young adults. While much of the existing research focuses on Western contexts, studies on collectivist vs. individualist cultures indicate that Indian families place a strong emphasis on interdependence, which can either serve as a support system or restrict individual autonomy.

Research Question

How do family dynamics, shaped by cultural and societal norms, influence the emotional and psychological well-being of Indian young adults?

The overarching question encompasses the study's exploration of parental influence, gender norms, communication patterns, adverse childhood experiences, and the role of financial independence, providing a comprehensive framework for the research.

Rationale of the Study

Family dynamics significantly influence the psychological and emotional well-being of young adults, particularly in cultures where familial structures play a central role in personal development. In the Indian context, hierarchical family systems, gender norms, and socio-economic conditions shape young adults' autonomy, emotional regulation, and mental health outcomes. While previous research has examined parental involvement, risk-taking behaviours, and cross-cultural differences in family relationships, there remains a gap in understanding how these dynamics specifically impact Indian young adults navigating modern societal shifts. By investigating these themes, this research contributes to the growing discourse on family support structures, offering insights that can inform parental education programs, mental health interventions, and policy recommendations. Recognizing the evolving nature of Indian family structures, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how familial interactions influence young adults' emotional well-being and resilience in a rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore nuanced perspectives and experiences. It is a combination of thematic analysis, interpretivist framework and a constructivist paradigm providing a cohesive approach to examining the interplay between family dynamics and young adults' well-being in an Indian sociocultural context. This section outlines the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and analytical approach.

Study Design

The study adopts a interpretivist-constructivist methodology, which provides an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences. The qualitative approach was chosen to capture the complexity of family dynamics and their impact on well-being. Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather rich, detailed narratives (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). These interviews allowed for flexibility in probing participants' thoughts while maintaining a consistent framework across sessions.

Participants

Participants were selected through convenience sampling, a pragmatic approach given the study's time constraints and resource availability (Edgar & Manz, 2017). This method involved recruiting young adults who were students in a University in Andhra Pradesh, who were readily accessible and willing to share personal experiences. The sample included 12 participants, balanced by gender (6 males, 6 females), aged 18 to 25 years. Participants belonged to middle and upper-middle socioeconomic backgrounds, providing a lens into how familial interactions influence well-being across these strata.

Procedure

Recruitment began with an outreach to interested participants within the inclusion criteria. After introducing the research topic, informed consent was obtained from all participants for audio recordings and use of their data strictly for research purposes.

After carefully framing 20 open-ended interview questions with the faculty advisors, clarity and neutrality were ensured. Interviews were conducted in private settings to minimize distractions and foster a comfortable environment. Each session began with general questions to establish rapport, progressively delving into more specific topics related to family

dynamics and well-being. On average, interviews lasted 40 minutes, providing substantial primary data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Participants were briefed on the research's objectives and assured of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time or skip questions they found uncomfortable. Faculty advisors were consulted to mitigate subjective biases in question design and data interpretation. Participants were informed that their responses were confidential and would be used exclusively for academic purposes.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to process and interpret the qualitative data, following a systematic framework (Jason & Glenwick, 2016). The steps included:

- **Data Familiarization:** Verbatim transcripts were generated from the audio recordings and thoroughly reviewed.
- **Coding:** Key concepts and ideas were identified and assigned codes.
- **Theme Development:** Similar codes were grouped to form sub-themes, which were then reviewed and refined into overarching themes.
- **Naming Themes:** Clear, descriptive names were attributed to each theme to encapsulate its essence within the context of the study.

By systematically identifying patterns and relationships in the data, thematic analysis enabled a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and insights into how family dynamics shape their well-being.

Results

Thematic analysis of the data yielded five overarching themes that illustrate the interplay between family dynamics and the well-being of Indian young adults. These themes reflect participants' diverse experiences and provide insights into how familial relationships influence emotional, psychological, and social health.

Theme 1: Parental Influence on Decision-Making and Autonomy

Participants reported varying degrees of parental involvement in major decisions, ranging from education and career choices to daily activities. While some described their parents as collaborative decision-makers, others highlighted a hierarchical structure, with fathers typically having the final say.

Subtheme 1.1: Gendered Decision-Making

Many participants observed that decision-making roles in their families were influenced by traditional gender norms. Fathers were often seen as financial decision-makers, while mothers contributed to domestic matters.

“If it is anything related to finances, it solely depends on my father. And, yeah, if it is domestic ones, like, you know, the kitchen related things, it depends on my mother... So, even if it is a kitchen decision, whatever it might be, we can voice it out, but the ultimate decision lies with my father.”

Subtheme 1.2: Evolving Autonomy

Several participants noted an increase in their involvement in family decisions as they transitioned into adulthood, signaling a shift in parental dynamics.

“So as of now, all the major decisions, if it's like financial decisions, will be taken by my father. But starting from [when I was] 20 years old, my father started involving me too [...]

So that's when he started involving me because he saw how I talk to people at home and manage stuff when there is an argument going on. So he believed that I'm more mature and he started talking to me on how things outside work, how finances work, how business works and that's when he started taking my opinion on things. So now the majority of the decisions, both me and my father, are taking.”

Theme 2: Gender-Based Treatment and Expectations

Participants highlighted differential treatment based on gender, which shaped their experiences of autonomy, safety, and societal expectations.

Subtheme 2.1: Restrictive Norms for Women

Female participants described restrictions on attire, mobility, and autonomy compared to their male siblings, reflecting broader societal norms.

“So my mother, when she got married she used to wear kurtas and chudidar sets which was not liked by my father at that point of time. So she started wearing more sarees. And now when I start wearing jeans or frocks, my mother tells me that my father doesn't like it. So don't dress up this way.”

“Yes, I've faced some situations where my parents used to ask me to take my younger brother who's 12 when I go out for safety and I felt so bad. I'm 20 and he's 12 and they still want me to take my brother with me. I feel this is a very prevalent treatment in most households.”

“When men go out with shorts from the house it is fine. But when women go to a party wearing a frock that is less than knee, they will shout that you should not wear this thing.”

Subtheme 2.2: Burden of Responsibility on Men

Male participants reported societal and familial pressures to conform to traditional roles as providers, often leading to stress and self-doubt.

“There is more responsibility on men to earn and settle down. That is not expected from women. We are expected to be the breadwinners, so I need to find a job faster than my sister does”

Theme 3: Emotional Expression and Communication Patterns

Family communication styles significantly impacted participants’ emotional well-being, with many describing either open or restrictive environments.

Subtheme 3.1: Emotional Suppression

Participants in hierarchical families described suppressing emotions to avoid conflict or backlash.

“I was emotional. I used to cry but then I don't know, I cried a lot. At some point I just stopped crying. I didn't feel like crying. Also if my mother ever saw me crying she would tell me not to cry continuously or she would shout at me for crying which also had an impact on me.”

“My grandparents are very particular about some things. As of now they passed away but when they were there they told me men shouldn't cry if men cry, society thinks they are weak.”

Subtheme 3.2: Collaborative Resolution

Families that fostered open dialogue were associated with participants developing healthier conflict resolution skills.

“I clearly told my parents that I have no intentions of marrying anyone right now. Even if I want to go about it, I will opt for a marriage where I will bring someone home, not someone that you bring me. So I clearly said that word to word and my mom started listening to me more so it became easier. [...] My parents will not stop convincing me, but they won't force me either. It's like my mom said that ‘OK, I don't like the way you are thinking or this, but since you are being honest, it is fine.’ I said like I am being very honest and I wanted you to understand my perspective. So they are not forcing me and are giving advice to convince me more time.”

Theme 4: Adverse Childhood Experiences and Emotional Resilience

Early life challenges, such as neglect or emotional abuse, were linked to difficulties in emotional regulation and self-esteem.

Subtheme 4.1: Neglect and Its Impact

Participants who experienced parental neglect during formative years reported feelings of inadequacy and emotional distance from their families.

“She [the participant’s sister] was sent out to a classical dance class, to music, to abacus, to swimming, to drawing, to multiple of these. That was a privilege she got, which I did not because my parents were busy with other work when I was around 10 or 9 when I was interested in stuff. They were busy and I wasn't able to go to the classes I wanted to, but she was able to. So there are multiple of them like that, but yeah.”

Subtheme 4.2: Building Resilience

Despite adversity, some participants demonstrated resilience by seeking therapy, fostering self-awareness, or breaking cycles of negativity.

“So personally I chose it because I did have drama and I did go through therapy. So that's when I realized people out there like me. I went through trauma when I was a child, so it made me realize there are a lot more children outside who might not be able to access therapy.”

Theme 5: Financial Independence and Personal Growth

Achieving financial independence was viewed as a critical step towards autonomy and well-being by many participants.

Subtheme 5.1: Breaking Traditional Expectations

Female participants particularly emphasized the importance of financial independence as a means of challenging societal norms.

“We have enough money so you don't need to work. You just get married to a guy, he will take care of you.’ These are the words I've been hearing since my childhood. At that point of time I thought this is only life. And later I realised they were putting in the rules of the society [in me]. So I'll surely study well and will become [financially] independent in my interested field.”

Subtheme 5.2: Alleviating Familial Burdens

Male participants often expressed a desire to relieve their parents of financial stress, viewing it as a marker of success and maturity.

“I want to earn money as quickly as possibly so that I do not have to keep depending on my father for money.”

“I had a very bad childhood experience [...] We were disrespected for not having money so I really want to be financially independent as soon as possible. So that I can give my father a rest. He worked so hard for us and we had many hard days in our past as of now we were fine. I really wanted to change our social status a lot and make my parents happy as soon as possible.”

Discussion

This study explored the impact of family dynamics on the well-being of Indian young adults, focusing on themes of parental influence, gendered expectations, emotional expression, adverse childhood experiences, and financial independence. The findings illuminate how familial interactions, shaped by cultural and societal norms, influence emotional, psychological, and social health.

Parental Influence and Autonomy

The study found that decision-making within families is often hierarchical, with fathers typically assuming authority over significant matters such as finances. This aligns with existing literature highlighting patriarchal norms in Indian families, where men are often viewed as the primary decision-makers (Ramos & Vasconcelos, 2021). However, participants noted an evolving dynamic, where young adults, particularly older children, are increasingly involved in decisions. This shift suggests a gradual movement toward shared decision-making, reflecting the influence of modern education and exposure to global perspectives. The results emphasize the need for parental approaches that balance guidance with autonomy.

Encouraging young adults to participate in family decisions can foster a sense of responsibility and self-efficacy, ultimately promoting emotional well-being.

Gender-Based Treatment and Societal Expectations

The findings revealed stark gender disparities in familial treatment, with female participants facing restrictive norms around clothing, mobility, and independence. These experiences mirror broader societal expectations that reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting women's agency while burdening men with expectations of financial provision and leadership (Chakraborty, 2003). Such disparities contribute to stress, frustration, and diminished well-being among young adults. To address these issues, families and communities must challenge entrenched gender norms and create equitable environments that allow individuals to thrive irrespective of gender. Educational initiatives promoting gender sensitivity and workshops on inclusive family practices can be instrumental in driving this change.

Emotional Expression and Communication Patterns

The study highlighted the critical role of communication in family dynamics, with open dialogue linked to healthier conflict resolution and emotional well-being. Conversely, restrictive environments that suppress emotional expression were associated with heightened stress and interpersonal challenges. This aligns with prior research showing that emotional suppression impairs mental health and conflict resolution (Thomson et al., 2018). Promoting emotional literacy within families can mitigate these issues. Parents and guardians should be encouraged to create spaces where young adults feel safe expressing their emotions. Counseling and family therapy could further facilitate constructive communication and emotional connection.

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Resilience

Participants who experienced neglect or emotional abuse reported long-term impacts on self-esteem and emotional regulation. However, many also demonstrated remarkable resilience, actively seeking ways to break generational cycles of negativity. These findings resonate with existing research showing that supportive interventions and self-awareness can mitigate the effects of adverse childhood experiences (Hughes & Cossar, 2015). Interventions aimed at identifying and addressing childhood adversity within families can play a significant role in promoting well-being. Early detection of emotional challenges, coupled with access to mental health resources, can foster resilience and prevent long-term psychological distress.

Financial Independence and Personal Growth

Financial independence emerged as a crucial factor in young adults' well-being, particularly for female participants striving to break free from traditional gender norms. The desire for independence reflects a broader shift among young adults toward prioritizing self-determination and personal growth. Encouraging financial literacy and career development among young adults can support these aspirations. Families should view young adults' career choices as an extension of their personal growth, rather than adhering to conventional expectations. Policies supporting youth employment and entrepreneurship can further empower individuals to achieve financial autonomy.

Conclusion

This study underscores the profound impact of family dynamics on the well-being of Indian young adults, highlighting the interplay between parental influence, gender norms, emotional expression, and financial independence. Addressing the challenges identified requires a collaborative effort to promote equitable, supportive, and communicative family environments. By doing so, we can create pathways for young adults to achieve emotional resilience, psychological health, and personal growth.

Implications

The study's findings have significant implications for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals. Creating family education programs that emphasize the importance of equitable decision-making, emotional expression, and gender sensitivity can improve family dynamics. Mental health services tailored to address the challenges faced by young adults in patriarchal and hierarchical family systems are equally critical.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The small sample size, restricted to a single university in Andhra Pradesh, limits the generalizability of findings. Future research should include diverse populations across varying socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Additionally, integrating quantitative measures with qualitative data could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between family dynamics and well-being.

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