

Self-esteem and social support as predictors of happiness among adolescents living in socio-economic hardship

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■ **ABSTRACT** : The present study was investigated to assess the level of happiness among rural adolescents experiencing persistent socio-economic hardship and to examine the contribution of attributes like self-esteem and perceived social support on happiness of rural poor adolescents. The sample included 360 adolescents (15-18 years of age) belonging to intact two parent families and living in conditions of socio-economic hardship. The results revealed that despite of living in conditions of socio-economic hardship, majority of rural adolescents perceived high degree of happiness. Female adolescents perceived significantly more happiness in their life as compared to their male counterparts. Males manifested significantly greater self-esteem than females. Correlation analysis revealed that self-esteem and social support were significantly positively correlated with happiness. Regression analysis revealed that social support emerged as the strongest protective factor.

■ **KEY WORDS**: Happiness, Self-esteem, Social support, Stressful life events

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Happiness is not merely a transient emotional state short-lived and completely dictated of environmental events (Veenhoven, 1994) rather it is more often conceptualized as a personal trait (Costa and McCrae, 1980, 1984). The words like subjective well-being, psychological well-being, positive affect, satisfaction with life have been interchangeably used with happiness in the modern day research.

It is undoubtedly true that happiness is the single most sought after thing in the world and is the ultimate blessing of life. It is valuable to everyone, no matter who they are, where they live or what their status is in life. Everybody wants happiness. It is one of the most fundamental aspects of human beings and is ranked at the pinnacle of all human goals. In psychology as well, the importance of happiness has always been paramount. Happiness has been cited as a psychological state and is an overriding goal of human behaviour from the early days.

The scientific study of happiness is new, but, theories

about secrets of happiness are ages old. The philosophers of ancient Greece pondered over the question of happiness intensively and they found that happiness arises from a life of leisurely and intelligent reflection.

Socio-economic hardship has been identified as a salient risk factor for the psychological well-being of children (Huston *et al.*, 1994) leading towards stress and unhappiness among individuals experiencing it. Poverty is a conglomerate of conditions and events that amount to a pervasive stressor. Economic hard times can have severe consequences for individuals causing increased risk for mental stress among its members (Conger *et al.*, 1992). Mounting economic pressure generally bring budgetary matters to the forefront, enhancing preoccupation with financial issues that in many families, generate frustration, anger and general demoralization (Conger *et al.*, 1991) making a poor person at risk for stressful life. Though these strong emotional responses to serious financial difficulties are consonant with findings from a rich history of special psychological research demonstrating the negative

consequences of aversive events and conditions for human health and behaviour (Berkowitz, 1989), yet none of the research studies already available on poverty is indicative of stressful state of mind of all the subjects. Some people possess such a capacity to live remarkably happy, even in the face of poverty, stress, trauma or adversity.

This study focused on trying to understand why some individuals inspite of living persistently in the conditions of poverty are happier than others. It was presumed that inspite of stress of poverty, happy individuals are pre-equipped with certain inbuilt positive mechanism in themselves or their environment which protects them from the ill effects of poverty, while unhappy individuals are devoid of these attributes thus yielding themselves to the stressful conditions.

Research studies have shown self-esteem to be the best predictor of life satisfaction and happiness (Lewinsohn *et al.*, 1991). Self-esteem is defined by how much value people place on themselves. It is the evaluative component of self-knowledge. High self-esteem refers to a highly favourable global evaluation of the self. Low self-esteem, by definition, refers to an unfavourable definition of the self. Thus, it was expected that a positive relationship between self-esteem and happiness among adolescents would emerge in the present investigation. Adolescents with high self-esteem might not cope with difficulties by blaming themselves and becoming depressed, rather they manage stress in more constructive ways (Dumont and Provost, 1999).

A strong predictor of happiness was thus reported to be high self-esteem (Wilson, 1967). Some researchers consider self-esteem to be a component of happiness (Argyle, 2001). For example, Campbell *et al.* (1976) compared satisfaction with life satisfaction and reported that satisfaction with the self was the highest correlation with life satisfaction. However, Diener and Diener (1995) found that self-esteem was a stronger predictor of life satisfaction in cultures that encourage individualistic traits.

Another contextual factor which has recently been investigated in its protective role in the conditions of poverty and related risk was social support perceived by an individual, to be provided by kins, friends and others. Social support refers to information or actions (real or potential) that individuals believe that they are cared for, valued, or in a position to receive help from others when they need it (Heller, 1979). According to Barrera (1986) social support appears to be a complex construct encompassing at least three aspects: perceived support (an appraisal that one's environment is helpful), social embeddedness (the quantity and identity of individuals in one's network), and enacted support (actual supportive behaviour performed by network members, such as material aid, esteem support, advice, etc.). It has been conceptualized as a coping resource that affects to a great extent in a situation which is appraised as stressful (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and enables a person under stress to

change the situation, to change the meaning of the situation or to change his or her emotional reactions to the situation (Thoits, 1986). Social support is associated with better psychological health and happiness in general and reduces the negative psychological consequences of exposure to stressful life events thus leading a person to achieve happiness in life (Cohen and Wills, 1985).

For most individuals with a healthy social support network, major stressors in life can be more easily handled. A proper support network consists of a reinforcing family and friends who can help the affected individual to work through any problem, such as the death of a family member, loss of a job, major injury, or any of a number of other stressors that can contribute to psychological illnesses, such as depression. For individuals with an undeveloped social network, or those with a negatively reinforcing social network, these major life events can cause greater harm to the individual because of a lack of support that most individuals have. An underdeveloped social network cannot handle the pressure of an individual looking for support, and a negatively framed social network can actually reinforce thoughts of hopelessness, failure, and being worthless. Without this support, it is more likely for that individual to develop symptoms of depression (Wade and Kendler, 2000).

In the Indian context, social support can have a still larger impact because it is the most pertinent characteristic of Indian social system. Social support intensely embedded in our ongoing social interactions, more particularly among rural poor, are a part of an ever changing network of social relationships. Thus, social support assumed an important function in achieving happiness.

Considering the above theoretical basis, the present study aims to investigate the level of happiness among rural adolescents experiencing persistent socio-economic hardship. It also assesses the relationship and contribution of self-esteem and social support as predictors of happiness among rural adolescents inspite of living in socio-economic hardship.

■ RESEARCH METHODS

The sample comprised of 360 rural adolescents in the age range of 15-18 years belonging to intact two parent families and living in conditions of socio-economic hardship purposively drawn from Government Senior Secondary Schools of Mohali district of Punjab. The sample was divided to have equal number of boys ($n = 180$) and girls ($n = 180$). Their socio-economic status was confirmed by using socio-economic status scale by Kulshreshta (1981). All these adolescents belonged to low socio-economic status category only. The selected subjects were approached in the schools to assess their perception of happiness and its predictors like self-esteem and social support. The adolescents selected for the final sample were approached in the schools. They were

explained the purpose of study and were asked to fill up the questionnaires. They were also ensured that whatever information they provide will be used purely for research purpose only and would be kept confidential. Data were collected in small groups of adolescents.

Tools/Measures :

Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, 2001) was administered to investigate the perception of happiness among the adolescents. It is a 29 item questionnaire measuring the main components of happiness *i.e.* achievement and satisfaction, enjoyment, vigour and health. The test-retest reliability co-efficient of the scale was 0.90.

The Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1986) was used to examine the self-esteem profile of adolescents. It contains 58 items which measure self-esteem of the adolescents in different situations of life like general, home, social and school. The test retest reliability co-efficient of the scale was 0.92.

Socio-economic status scale form B (Kulshreshta, 1981) was used to judge the socio-economic status of the respondents. This scale is meant for measuring the socio-economic status of the rural respondents. It is a verbal scale which contains 20 items. It measures various characteristics of the respondents and their families like parents’ education, parents’ occupation, number of siblings, family type, birth order and possession of household articles and agricultural implements etc.

Interpersonal Support Evaluation Checklist (Simon *et al.*, 1996) short form, originally produced by Cohen and Hoberman (1983) was used to measure the social support as perceived by adolescents. The checklist has 14 items which measure the extent of emotional support, tangible support, closeness and belongingness. However, the present study included the perception of total social support only. All the items had a response framework from definitely true (1) to definitely false (5) with positively worded items reverse coded so that higher scores reflect higher levels of support. Test retest reliability co-efficient of the scale was 0.90.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Considering the objectives of the present study, the results are presented in three sections. The first section reports the analysis on happiness profile of adolescents living in socio-economic hardship and gender differences therein. The second section reveals the correlation analysis between happiness and self-esteem and happiness and social support and in the third section, the results of regression analysis are mentioned to show the impact of self-esteem and social support on happiness.

Section 1: Happiness profile of adolescents living in socio-economic hardship :

Table 1 reveals the distribution of the sample across different levels of happiness as perceived by adolescents living in poverty. In the total sample, major proportion (67.50%) of the adolescents reported happiness at high level followed by 29.72 per cent who perceived average level of happiness. Only 2.78 per cent of adolescents recorded low happiness. Majority of the female (65%) as well as male adolescents (70 %) reported happiness at high level. Only 33.33 per cent female adolescents perceived average level of happiness and among male adolescents, 26.11 per cent recorded average level of happiness. Less than 2 per cent female adolescents and only 3.89 per cent male adolescents recorded low happiness. Chi-square value depicted gender differences to be non-significant as far as distribution of both the genders across different levels of happiness as perceived by adolescents, was concerned. The mean happiness scores among two genders were significantly different, with females scoring higher as compared to male adolescents (Table 2). It showed that females perceived more happiness as compared to male adolescents ($p < 0.05$).

Section 2: Correlation between self esteem and happiness :

Table 3 presents the correlation analysis between happiness and different domains of self-esteem among total sample as well as both the gender groups. It revealed that all dimensions of self-esteem among the overall sample as well

Table 1 : Per cent distribution across different levels of happiness as perceived by adolescents living in socio-economic hardship

Happiness level	Total		Male		Female		Chi-square
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Low	10	2.78	7	3.89	3	1.67	1.03
Average	107	29.72	47	26.11	60	33.33	
High	243	67.50	126	70.00	117	65.00	

Total sample N = 360; Males = 180; Females = 180

Table 2 : Gender differences in perception of happiness (Mean \pm SD) as perceived by adolescents living in socio-economic hardship

Score	Total		Male		Female		t-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Happiness scores	140.50	20.58	139.21	22.87	141.79	17.97	2.08**

** $p < 0.05$, (males: $n_1 = 180$; females: $n_2 = 180$)

as males and females, except social esteem in females, were positively related with happiness scores.

The correlation co-efficients of overall sample were found to be significant in general self-esteem ($p < .05$), home esteem ($p < .01$), school esteem ($p < .01$), total self-esteem ($p < .01$). The data on correlation between self-esteem and happiness among males reported the similar results. While among females, positive significant relationship was found between happiness and general self-esteem ($p < .05$), happiness and home esteem ($p < .01$) and happiness and total self-esteem ($p < .01$). Though, the relationship with school esteem was non-significant, but it was positive. Social esteem was negatively significantly ($p < .01$) correlated with happiness.

Correlation between social support and happiness :

Table 4 gives the correlation between happiness and social support among total sample as well as both the gender groups. It revealed that in the overall sample ($p < .01$) as well as males ($p < .01$) and females ($p < .01$), social support was significantly positively correlated with happiness. It showed higher degree of social support perceived by adolescents more happiness the adolescents were experiencing.

Section 3: Regression analysis :

Table 5 represents the estimates of multiple linear regression of self-esteem on happiness among the total respondents. Home esteem contributed significantly ($p < 0.01$) as a protective factor in upgrading the levels of happiness among rural poor adolescents. Those adolescents who held high and positive home esteem about their parents and home, perceived more happiness in their life because it boosted their happiness status. School esteem was also found to be, yet, another factor which was contributing significantly positively ($p < 0.05$) in raising the happiness level of rural poor adolescents. Thus, the regression analysis of self-esteem on happiness revealed that home esteem, school esteem emerged as major protective attributes in enhancing happiness of the adolescents who lived in poverty.

Regression analysis (Table 6) revealed that social support proved as the strongest protective factor because it significantly positively contributed towards raising the happiness profile of respondents. It means that the social support perceived by adolescents was beneficial for their happiness. Thus, it may be concluded that social support emerged as major protective factor contributing towards happiness profile of rural poor adolescents.

Table 3: Correlation between perceived happiness and different dimensions of self esteem among adolescents living in socio-economic hardship

Self-esteem	Correlation co-efficient (r)		
	Total	Male	Female
General self-esteem	0.174**	0.217***	0.151**
Home esteem	0.256***	0.257***	0.274***
Social esteem	-0.026	-0.001	-0.056
School esteem	0.162***	0.219***	0.106
Total self-esteem	0.230***	0.286***	0.194***

** and *** indicate that significance of values at $P=0.05$ and 0.01 , respectively

Table 4 : Correlation between perceived happiness and social support among adolescents living in socio-economic hardship

Social support	Correlation co-efficient (r)		
	Males	Females	Total
Social support	0.430***	0.425***	0.428***

*** indicate that significance of value at $P=0.01$, respectively

Table 5 : The estimates of multiple linear regression of self-esteem on happiness among the total respondents

Self-esteem	β (Estimate)	S.E.	t-value
General self-esteem	0.187	0.318	0.590
Home esteem	2.768	0.693	3.996***
Social esteem	-1.163	-0.804	1.447
School esteem	1.533	0.714	2.147**

*, ** and *** indicate that significance of values at $P=0.1$, 0.05 and 0.01 , respectively

Table 6 : The estimates of multiple linear regression of social support on happiness among the total respondents

Social support	β (Estimate)	S.E.	t-value
Social support	0.902	0.101	8.914***

** and *** indicate that significance of values at $P=0.05$ and 0.01 , respectively

The present study was conducted to investigate self-esteem and social support as predictors of happiness among rural adolescents experiencing persistent socio-economic hardship. The empirical generalization that adolescents who are living in conditions of socio-economic hardship and poverty have poor psychological well-being which has been observed repeatedly in the previous research (Thompson *et al.*, 1995). But it is not reaffirmed by the present results. The silver lining of this study is that inspite of living in such impoverished conditions, a large proportion of the adolescents perceived high level of happiness. Lever (2004) asserted that statistically subjective well-being is related to the socio-economic group to which subjects belong, with the poorest subjects reporting the least satisfaction. Gender differences in mean scores of happiness in this study, as perceived by adolescents living in socio-economic hardship revealed that the female adolescents perceived more happiness as compared to male adolescents. Argyle and Lu (1990) also documented that females reported significantly higher scores in happiness. On the contrary, Francis *et al.* (1998) reported significantly higher scores among males in happiness. Research studies have shown self-esteem to be the best predictor of life satisfaction and happiness (Lewinsohn *et al.*, 1991). Dumont and Provost (1999) accounted that adolescents with high self-esteem might not cope with difficulties by blaming themselves and becoming depressed, rather they manage stress in more constructive ways. Contrarily, low esteem has been established to be directly linked with depressive symptoms. Self-esteem has a strong relation to happiness and low self-esteem is more likely to lead to depression. Results of the present study are disharmonious with the findings by Lyubomirsky *et al.* (2005) which indicated that the individuals with low self-esteem were happier than one's who were possessing high self-esteem. The key to these individuals' happiness inspite of their low self-worth is their extraverted nature. They are simply more social and outgoing, which bolsters their happiness but not their self-esteem. The results of regression analysis of individual attributes on happiness revealed that home esteem, school esteem emerged as major protective attributes in enhancing happiness of the adolescents who lived in poverty. Lewinsohn *et al.* (1991) reported self esteem to be the best predictor of life satisfaction and happiness. Low esteem has been established to be directly linked with depressive symptoms. Results are also in harmony with a major International Study of self-esteem and happiness which was reported by Diener and Diener (1995). The data came from more than 13,000 college students from 49 different universities, 31 countries, and five continents. High self-esteem emerged as the strongest of several predictors of life satisfaction overall. The simple correlation between self-esteem and happiness was quite significant at .47. In short, self-esteem and happiness are substantially interrelated. A meta-analysis of the relation between 137 personality traits and happiness

(subjective well-being) was published by DeNeve and Cooper (1998). They found that "private collective self-esteem" was one of the strongest predictors of happiness ($r = .31$). Their results provided further evidence that self-esteem is consistently correlated with happiness. Taken together, these findings uniformly indicate that self-esteem and happiness are strongly interrelated.

Further, the findings of the study demonstrates that for most individuals, with a healthy social support network, major stressors in life can be more easily handled. Findings are supported with a study by Wade and Kendler (2000) which indicated that a proper support network consists of a reinforcing family and friends who can help the affected individual to work through any problem, such as the death of a family member, loss of a job, major injury, or any of a number of other stressors that can contribute to psychological illnesses, such as depression. For individuals with an undeveloped social network, or those with a negatively reinforcing social network, these major life events can cause greater harm to the individual because of a lack of support that most individuals have. An underdeveloped social network cannot handle the pressure of an individual looking for support, and a negatively framed social network can actually reinforce thoughts of hopelessness, failure, and being worthless. Without this support, it is more likely for that individual to develop symptoms of depression. Social support from friends affects health of both kinds that is psychological as well as physiological. Empirical data showed that how personal network protects people from life distress. Results are also supported by Mathews (1986) which indicated that people with spouses and friends are more likely to be healthy and mentally better than people living alone. Furthermore, spouse's role and friend's role provide emotional support and well being. Indeed, people report happier feelings when with others (Pavot *et al.*, 1991). Findings have also indicated that social support from friends affects health of both kinds *i.e.* physiological as well as psychological. This reveals that friends and relatives are the particular source of happiness (Pavot *et al.*, 1991 and North *et al.*, 2008). Researchers have found fairly consistent associations between social support and happiness. Reis and Franks (1994) studied 846 individuals who were 33 or over, the study suggested that anxiety and depression, subjective health and number of doctor's visits were associated with both intimacy and social support, but social support was the key predictor, it consisted of actual help, group belongingness, positive appraisal and having a special bond. When afflicted with leukaemia or heart disease, those who experience extensive social support have higher survival rates (Case *et al.*, 1992; Colon *et al.*, 1991; Williams *et al.*, 1992) when social ties break with widowhood, divorce or dismissal from a job, immune defenses weaken for a time and rates of disease and death rise (Dohrenwend *et al.*, 1982; National Academy of Science, 1984).

Conclusion :

- Despite living in conditions of socio-economic hardship, majority of the rural adolescents perceived high degree of happiness (67.50%) followed by 29.70 per cent being in average category and only 2.78 per cent depicted low profile of happiness.
- Female adolescents perceived significantly more happiness as compared to their male counterparts.
- Majority of the rural poor adolescents held average level general, social and home esteem, whereas, the school and total esteem was held at high level by major section of the respondents.
- Males adjudged their self-worth better than females in different situations *i.e.* general, home, social, school and total self-esteem. Differences were significant in general self-esteem, home and total self-esteem.
- Majority of the respondents reported high level of social support. Females perceived greater social support as compared to males.
- All dimensions of self-esteem were significantly positively correlated with happiness profile of adolescents except social esteem where the correlation was negative but non-significant among females.
- Perception of social support by the rural poor adolescents was strongly positively correlated with their happiness index.
- Self-esteem in home and school situations emerged as protective factor contributing towards happiness in male adolescents and overall sample, whereas, social esteem and risk factors in reducing happiness of male adolescents.
- Home esteem acted as a strong protective factor for happiness of female respondents.
- Social support emerged as protective factor.

Recommendations :

More in depth studies may be conducted by taking into account other variables such as family structure, friendship patterns, sibling relationships, relationship with grandparents, impact of technology, locus of control, aspirations of adolescents, religion, income etc. Intervention studies can be conducted to alleviate stress and promote happiness in families and communities. Study can be extended to other SES categories and age-groups and comparative studies can also be conducted between rural and urban population. Researchers can undertake long term projects in this area of research. Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to the existing knowledge of self-esteem and social support as predictors of happiness.

Concluding remarks :

Thus, the present investigation concludes that high self-

esteem appears to operate as a stock of positive feelings that can be a valuable resource under some conditions. In the face of failure or stress, people with high self-esteem seem able to bounce back better than people with low self-esteem. The general pattern of being happier and less depressed indicates a readiness to feel good. People with low self-esteem lack this stock of good feelings and as a result are more vulnerable. Adolescence stage is full of transition phase and hence, social networking mitigates the effect of emotional upheavals as social support provides assistance, guidance, attachment which further provides comfort, security, pleasure, sense of belongingness and identity that has a positive effect on health and a buffering effect on stress and ultimately promoting happiness and well-being among individuals.

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