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Family Relationships and Self-Esteem in Adolescents

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Sonaj Bilal

International Balkan University, Skopje, North Macedonia

https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3000-3136

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sonaj Bilal

Email: sonaj.bilal@ibu.edu.mk

Sonaj Bilal

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the connection between family relationships and self-esteem, as well as to reveal the existence or non-existence of gender differences among adolescents in terms of the perception of family relationships and the level of self-esteem. The research was carried out on a convenience sample of 120 people, 51 men and 69 women. The respondents were first, second, third and fourth year students in a high school in Skopje, N. Macedonia.

The Scale for the Quality of Family Interaction prepared by Aneta Vulic - Prtoric, the Scale for Perception of Family Relationships prepared by Ivana Macuka and the Coopersmith Inventory were used as instruments.

The findings from this research indicate that there are no gender-based differences in how adolescents perceive family relationships. However, the study revealed that male adolescents generally possess greater self-esteem than females.

Additionally, the results show a correlation between how family relationships are perceived and self-esteem levels. A positive correlation exists between the general atmosphere in the family environment, parental acceptance, and parental emotionality and self-esteem. Conversely, a negative association is noted between parental rejection, and parental control and self-esteem.

Keywords: self-esteem, family, adolescents

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Introduction

Throughout life, self-esteem is influenced by interpersonal relationships, that is, by formal and intimate interactions with partners, peers, and family members. The information that the individual receives from the so-called significant others (parents, friends, teachers, etc.) is very important because that influences self-esteem. Positive information that the individual receives from the environment increases, while negative information decreases the level of self-esteem. The family is a crucial social environment for the growth and manifestation of self-esteem. This is shown in most modern research. The way parents treat their adolescent child and the way the adolescent perceives those relationships are vital in the development of high or low self-esteem in the adolescent. Adolescents who perceive general interactions in the family and interactions with parents positively have higher self-esteem and this has been proven in many studies.

The aim of this study is to explore the link between family dynamics, that is, family relationships and self-esteem, while also finding out if there are gender differences among adolescents concerning these variables.

Family Relationships and Self-Esteem in the Period of Adolescence

Adolescence is a period in which adolescents have two seemingly contradictory tasks in their relationship with their parents. Their task is to get rid of their dependence on their parents, but at the same time to maintain their relationship with them.

Adolescents' need to be independent from their parents leads to numerous conflicts and arguments between parents and adolescents, but the relationship between them is not abolished. Their emotional attachment to the parents does not decrease and they continue to rely on family for comfort, advice and support. They usually preserve the attitudes and values of the family on moral, political and social issues (Murdzeva – Skarik, 2004).

Self-esteem during adolescence is critical as it often sets the stage for an individual's self-esteem later in life. The self-esteem of adolescents is shaped by various factors including gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family relationships. Moreover, an adolescent's self-esteem can differ across various aspects of their life, such as in social or academic settings. From a developmental perspective, it can be said that in all periods of childhood global self-esteem is highly positive.

Around the 12th year, it decreases, and in the high school years and late youth, it again shows an increasing trend and, above all, relative stability (Takasmanova – Sokolovska, 1998).

Despite the numerous factors that affect self-esteem, it can be said that self-esteem during adolescence does not depend on age, nor on the level of formal-logical thinking, but, above all, depends on the socio-emotional climate in the family, and that means that more emotional warmth, acceptance, affection and praise lead to greater self-esteem (Takasmanova – Sokolovska, 1998, as cited in Murdzeva – Skarik, 2004).

Dekovic and Meus (1997, as cited in Dusek & McIntyre, 2003) found that supporting parenting techniques and practices promote higher self-esteem in adolescents, improving peer relationships and personal competencies, regardless of gender or ethnicity. On the other hand, using guilt as a disciplinary method tends to reduce self-esteem.

Method

The aim of this study is to investigate the connection between family relationships and self-esteem, and to determine whether there are gender differences in these variables among adolescents. The study was guided by the following questions:

- Is there a connection between the perception of relationships in the family and the level of self-esteem?
- Are there gender differences among adolescents regarding the perception of family relationships and the level of self-esteem?

Participants and Instruments

The research was conducted on a convenience sample of a total of 120 respondents. The respondents were students from the first, second, third and fourth year in one of the high schools in Skopje, R. N. Macedonia. One class with 30 students was taken from each year. The students were between the ages of 15 and 18 and were all of Macedonian nationality. Due to the fact that the questionnaires were given to students from an already formed class, the representation of male and female adolescents is not equal. Males are represented by 42.5% while females by 57.5%.

Two instruments were used to examine the family relationships, namely the *Scale for the Quality of Family Interaction* by Anita Vulic – Prtoric, which consists of three subscales (the firs measuring general atmosphere (interaction) in the family and the second and third subscale measuring the interaction separately with the *mother* and the *father* through two dimensions: *acceptance* and *rejection*) and the *Scale for Perception of Family Relationships* by Ivana Macuka, measuring the parenting styles through the dimensions of *emotionality* and *control*.

In order to assess adolescents' self-esteem, *The Coopersmith Inventory* was used. The statements in this instrument are grouped into four subscales: *general attitude towards oneself*, "*me and the peers*", "*me and the parents*", and "*I as a student*".

Results and Discussion

Tables 1 through 9 display the results for the differences between male and female adolescents across various dimensions of the *family relationships* variable: *general family interaction*, *maternal acceptance* and *rejection*, *paternal acceptance* and *rejection*, *maternal emotionality* and *control*, *paternal emotionality* and *control*. To determine whether the gender-based differences are statistically significant, t-test was applied.

Table 1: Gender-based differences regarding ***perception of the general interaction (atmosphere) in the family***

Gender	**M**	**σ**	**N**	**df**	**t**	**p**
Male	45,08	4,42	51	118	1,48	p>0.05
Female	46,35	5,02	69			

Table 2: Gender-based differences regarding ***mother's acceptance***

Gender	**M**	**σ**	**N**	**df**	**t**	**p**
Male	47,78	4,65	51	118	1,57	p>0.05
Female	44,48	5,42	69			

Table 3: Gender-based differences regarding ***mother's rejection***

Gender	**M**	**σ**	**N**	**df**	**t**	**p**
Male	22,00	7,43	51	118	1,46	p>0.05
Female	19,97	7,76	69			

Table 4: Gender-based differences regarding ***father's acceptance***

Gender	M	σ	N	df	t	p
Male	40,22	7,07	51	118	0,80	p>0.05
Female	39,25	5,95	69			

Table 5: Gender-based differences regarding ***father's rejection***

Gender	M	σ	N	df	t	p
Male	21,75	8,64	51	118	1,36	p>0.05
Female	19,64	8,07	69			

Table 6: Gender-based differences regarding ***mother's emotionality***

Gender	M	σ	N	df	t	p
Male	40,71	4,22	51	118	1,08	p>0.05
Female	41,51	3,83	69			

Table 7: Gender-based differences regarding ***mother's control***

Gender	M	σ	N	df	t	p
Male	14,5	3,79	51	118	0,30	p>0.05
Female	14,26	3,13	69			

Table 8: Gender-based differences regarding ***father's emotionality***

Gender	M	σ	N	df	t	p
Male	38,24	4,8	51	118	0,43	p>0.05
Female	38,62	4,73	69			

Table 9: Gender-based differences regarding ***father's control***

Gender	M	σ	N	df	t	p
Male	13,76	3,25	51	118	0,07	p>0.05
Female	13,72	3,05	69			

The results show that there is no statistically significant gender-based difference among adolescents regarding the perception of the general family interactions and the perception of relationships with the mother and father.

It can be said that the obtained results are expected, because they align with the literature that was reviewed for the purposes of this research, which suggests that an adolescent's perception of family interactions and the degree of parental

acceptance significantly influence their relationship with their parents. Factors such as individual personality, environmental conditions, cultural background, and family structure (e.g., complete or incomplete families) play a crucial role. Parental behaviours such as warmth, support, encouragement, and emotional expression—along with physical closeness and verbal affection—greatly affect the quality of the child-parent relationship. Conversely, negative behaviours like coldness, disapproval, and punishment can hinder the development of a close and trusting relationship and open communication between parent and child.

This research aligns with findings by Masselam, Markus, and Stunkard (1990, as cited in Shek, 2000) which indicate no gender differences among adolescents in communication with parents or satisfaction with parent-adolescent relationships.

Tables 10 to 14 display the results for the differences among male and female adolescents regarding *self-esteem* and its subscales. To determine whether gender-based differences are statistically significant, t-test was applied.

Table 10: Gender-based differences regarding ***self-esteem***

Gender	**M**	**σ**	**N**	**df**	**t**	**p**
Male	35,75	4,84	51	118	2,68	p<0.01
Female	33,04	6,38	69			

Table 11: Gender-based differences regarding ***general attitude towards oneself***

Gender	**M**	**σ**	**N**	**df**	**t**	**p**
Male	17,00	2,73	51	118	1,96	p<0.05
Female	15,9	3,58	69			

Table 12: Gender-based differences regarding ***me and the peers***

Gender	**M**	**σ**	**N**	**df**	**t**	**p**
Male	7,02	1,22	51	118	2,27	p<0.05
Female	6,52	1,54	69			

Table 13: Gender-based differences regarding ***me and the parents***

Gender	**M**	**σ**	**N**	**df**	**t**	**p**
Male	6,29	1,36	51	118	1,83	p<0.05
Female	5,74	1,87	69			

Table 14: Gender-based differences regarding ***I as a student***

Gender	**M**	**σ**	**N**	**df**	**t**	**p**
Male	5,43	1,60	51	118	1,83	p<0.05
Female	4,88	1,75	69			

The results indicate a statistically significant gender difference in self-esteem and its subscales, with male adolescents displaying higher overall self-esteem and scoring higher on the subscales. This is consistent with the research of Hyde and Kling (1999), who analysed over 150,000 individuals and numerous studies since 1987, which indicates that females, especially aged 15-18, have lower self-esteem than males. Similarly, Dukes and Martinez (1994) found lower self-esteem among female compared to male high school students across a sample of 18,612 adolescents, further highlighting the significant role gender plays in self-esteem levels.

One explanation for why there are unequal levels of self-esteem between genders may be the way society treats men and women. In our society, either consciously or unconsciously or as a result of long-standing stereotypes and myths regarding women and men, society treats people of different genders differently. There are different expectations for men and women. Usually women are expected to be more gentle, caring, while men are expected not to show weakness, not to express emotions, to attach importance to achievements and usually boys are the ones who are more encouraged by parents, family and society in general.

Another explanation can be linked to the period of adolescence itself. Aadolescence is a time when the importance of physical attractiveness escalates, particularly for young girls. Most adolescents in this period are not satisfied with their physical appearance and consider that they are not beautiful and attractive enough. This negative self – perception can cause girls to have low self-esteem potentially resulting in more serious issues like depression, anxiety, eating disorders, etc.

Maehr and Nicholls (1980, as cited in Connor et al., 2004) attributed the self-esteem disparities among male and female adolescents to response bias, noting that girls generally give more modest answers in tests.

The results in Table 15 indicate a strong link between all dimensions of family relationships and self-esteem.

Table 15: Correlation between the research variables and their significance for df=118

Variables	Self-esteem	Significance levels for df=118
General interaction in the family	0,31	<0,01
Mother's acceptance	0,26	<0,01
Mother's rejection	-0,42	<0,01
Father's acceptance	0,40	<0,01
Father's rejection	-0.43	<0,01
Mother's emotionality	0,24	<0,01
Mother's control	-0,26	<0,01
Father's emotionality	0,40	<0,01
Father's control	-0,46	<0,01

Positive family relationships, characterized by emotional acceptance, warmth, and support, significantly enhance adolescent self-esteem. Conversely, rigid parental attitudes, lack of warmth, excessive control, and rejection can lead to low self-esteem. If the child knows that he/she is accepted, loved and respected by the family, the advice of the parents and their educational influences are more accepted and thus high self-esteem is more easily achieved (Todorović, 2004). There are several explanations for the association between perceptions of family relationships and adolescent self-esteem. According to James (2002), one explanation could be that positive family relationships, acceptance and strong family support grant adolescents a sense of stability and security, which is crucial during the challenging periods of adolescence. This stability and security contributes to the overall self-esteem.

The obtained results are in accordance with the results from the research of Parker and Benson (2004) as well as James (2002), which have demonstrated a strong link between family support and self-esteem. Furthermore, Margolin, Blythe, & Carbone (1988, as cited in Burnett & Demnar, 1996) also highlight the long-lasting impact of quality family relationships on self-esteem into late adolescence

In summary, the present study confirmed the findings from previous ones in terms of correlation between family relationships and self-esteem as well as gender differences among adolescents for those variables. While this study focuses on gender, self-esteem, and adolescents' perceptions of family relationships, it also acknowledges the potential influence of other variables such as peer support, academic achievement, socioeconomic status, school success, achievement motives,

number of siblings, and birth order. Additionally, the family structure—whether adolescents live with a single parent, both parents or in blended families—could significantly impact their self-view and familial interactions. Future studies might also benefit from considering both adolescents' and parents' perspectives on family dynamics. Further exploration of these aspects is essential to deepen our understanding of how family relationships and self-esteem shape adolescents.

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