

## **Adolescents and Parental Perception of Family Strength: Relation to Malay Adolescent Emotional and Behavioural Adjustment**

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### **Abstract**

*Adolescent and parental evaluation of family strength may have different significant impact on adolescent emotional and behavioural adjustment. The aim of this study was to examine adolescents' and parents' perception of family strength and the relationship of these perceptions to adolescent adjustment. 180 families participated in the study through a survey and standardized self-administered questionnaires were utilised. Significant differences were found regarding family strength between adolescent and their parent. Result showed adolescent perception of family strength was a significant predictor of their emotional and behavioural adjustment. The results of this study emphasise the importance of adolescent perception of family strength, and provide support to be taken into account when implementing any family programme.*

**Keywords:** Family strength, Malay adolescents, emotional, behavioural adjustment

### **Introduction**

The concepts and attributes of family strengths are clarified in the literature (Otto, 1975; Williams, Lingren, Rowe, Van Zandt, & Stinnett, 1985; Schlesinger, 1998; Moore, Chalk, Scarpa, & Vandivere, 2002). Comprehensively, family strengths are defined as the relationship patterns, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and competencies, and social and psychological characteristics that: (1) create a positive family identity; (2) promote satisfying and fulfilling interaction among family members; (3) encourage the development of the potential of the family group and individual family members; (4) contribute to the family's ability to deal effectively with stress and crisis; and (5) contribute to the family's ability to be supportive of other families (Williams et al., 1985; Kryan, Moore, & Zill, 1990; Schlesinger, 1998; Moore et al., 2002). According to family systems theory, the interactions occur reciprocally within family members and therefore affect the developmental of each family members (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). These mutual influencing patterns may provide particular insight into emotional and behavioral adjustment in adolescents.

A review of literature has shown that there were differences perception among family members on family strengths (Gazendam-Donofrio et al., 2007; Davern, Staiger, & Luk, 2005; Tamplin & Goodyer, 2001, Goldstein & Heaven, 2000, Shek, 1999). A study by Gazendam-Donofrio et al. (2007) revealed that adolescents perceived their family as less cohesive, expressive, organized, controlling and socially oriented than their parents. However they found there were no significance differences between father and mother perception on family functioning. Furthermore, adolescents boys and girls were found to perceive lower levels of family functioning that did their parents (Shek, 1999).

Family strengths have been associated with several dimensions of adolescent psychological well-being (e.g. Nasir, Ahmad Zamani, Khairudin, & Latipun, 2010; Moore, Whitney & Kinukawa, 2009, Shek, 2005). A study conducted by Nasir et al. (2010) found that family functioning has a significant relationship with depression among Malay and Indonesian juvenile delinquents. Other study in Korea by Kim and Kim (2008) also found that poorer family functioning, dysfunctional parental partner, and higher levels of family violence were associated with higher levels of delinquency behavior of adolescents. In addition, research by Shek (2005) found that Chinese adolescents who perceived family functioning as more negative were related to poorer adolescent psychological well-being. In depressed adolescent, family discord and negative relationship with parents are found to be a significant predictors of suicide attempt (Consoli et al., 2013).

Adolescents whose family practice more open communication are found to have a good mental health (Zarnaghash, Zarnaghash, & Zarnaghash, 2013). The family that function well in problem solving, communication, role playing, emotional response, affective involvement, behaviour control and general functioning were found to have adolescents with more desirable behaviour for obeying rules and social and educational regulations (Owringi, Yousliani, & Zarnaghash, 2011).

The research as discuss earlier are all based on the effect of family strength on the adolescent well-being from adolescent perspective. There is an evidence showed that the discrepancies between adolescent and parents perceptions on family functioning have a significant relationship with adolescent adjustment (Bagley, Bertrand, Bolitho, & Mallick, 2001). A study by Davern, Staiger, and Luk (2005) found that adolescent perception of interparental conflict are a better predictor of adolescent health than are parental perception of interparental conflict. This literature emphasizes the importance of different perceptions between adolescents and parents on family processes in relation to adolescent well-being. It is also possible that differences in adolescent and parental perceptions of family strength exist, and may produce different associations with adolescent emotional and behavioral adjustment. Based on the literature review above, the aim of this paper was to address the following questions:

- a) Do adolescents and their parents have different perceptions of family strength?
- b) Are adolescents/ parents differences in perceptions of family strength related to their gender?
- c) Are there any relationship between adolescent and parents perception of family strength with emotional and behavioural adjustment of adolescent?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were drawn from a larger sample that took part in a study of family strengths in urban and rural areas in Kedah, Selangor and Johor. The participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling. Only Malay, Chinese and Indian adolescents aged between 13 and 18 years old who have parents identified themselves as a member of strong family, have high quality of marriage, have a good relationship with their children and don't have family members involve with social problems (e.g; drug addict, alcoholic, stealing and free sex) through screening process recruited for the study. The unit analysis for the study was 180 Malay adolescents with one of their parents.

### **Procedure**

A set of standardized Malay was used to gather information from the participants. The questionnaire was aimed at collecting information on family strengths and adolescent emotional and behavioural adjustments as well as demographic information. A briefing on the objectives of the study, the limits to confidentiality and the related procedure were informed to the participants. The permission to participate in the study was also sought from the participants before administering the questionnaire. The questionnaire were either self-administered or administered by the interviewers. If it was administered, the interviewers asked questions based on the standardized questionnaire, indicated the response options to the questions, and recorded the participant's answer. A token of appreciation was given to the participants upon completion of the questionnaire.

### **Data Analysis**

A descriptive analysis was conducted to provide a clearer picture of the data distribution. Next, the independent sample t-tests were computed to examine the adolescent and parental differences in family strength. Then, the multiple regression analysis using hierarchical procedure was conducted to determine the relationships between adolescent and parental perception of family strength and adolescent emotional and behavioral adjustments while controlling socio-demographics characteristics (i.e. adolescent's age and adolescent's gender, parent's age, parent's gender, parent's education, number of children and family monthly income). Test of the assumptions of the multivariate analysis were also carried out, with residual scatter plots show normality, linearity and homoscedascity and there is no multicollinearity.

### **Measures**

**Family strength:** Malaysian Family Strengths Scale (MFSS) developed by Arshat, Baharudin, Juhari, Hasbullah, and Ishak (2012) which consist of 27 items was used to assess seven dimensions of family strength: 1) Communication (3 items); 2) Love (5 items); 3) Support (4 items); 4) Commitment (4 items); 5) Acceptance (4 items); 6) Religiosity (4 items); 7) Relationship (3 items).

The scale responses range from 1= definitely disagree to 6= definitely agree. Some of the items included were “Our family members help each other” and “Our family members take care each other when needed”. The total of family strength score was obtained by adding the scores for all the items where higher score indicate higher family strength. For this study, Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was 0.95.

**Emotional and behavioral adjustment:** The 25 items Malay version of Goodman’s Strengths and Difficulties (Goodman, 1997) was used to assess adolescent’s perception on emotional and behavioural adjustment. The 25 items are divided into 5 scales of 5 items each: hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer problems and prosocial behavior. Subscale scores were computed by summing scores on relevant items after recording reversed scored items that ranged between 1 to 10. A total difficulties score is derived by adding the scores of each of the scales, except the prosocial behaviour scale, producing a total score ranging from 0 to 40. A higher total score for difficult behavior indicates higher levels of problem in emotional and behavioral adjustment. For this study, Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was 0.57.

## Results

### *Socio-Demographics Characteristics*

As shown in Table 1, the average age of respondents involved in the study was 14.95 years old. Most of the respondents were female (61.9%). There were almost equal numbers of mother and father involved in this study with ages ranged 34 to 62 years ( $M=45.86$ ,  $SD=5.85$ ). About 35% of the parent had achieved tertiary qualification. On average, the parents have been married for about 21 years and had 4 children at the time of the study. A majority (81.7%) of the families reported a monthly household income that is lower than national average household income (MYR5000 or USD1582) (Department of Statistics, 2013).

**Table 1: A descriptive statistics of demographic variables**

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
Descriptive variables		
Adolescent’s age	14.73	1.27
Adolescent’s gender <sup>a</sup> (Male)	34.4%	
Parent’s age	45.86	5.89
Parent’s gender <sup>b</sup> (Male)	49.4%	
Parent’s education <sup>c</sup>	11.46	3.10
Duration of marriage	21.11	5.03
Family monthly income	3693.21	3585.35
Number of children	4.29	1.76
Family locality <sup>d</sup> (Rural)	50%	

<sup>a</sup>Adolescent gender: 0=female, 1=male; <sup>b</sup>parents gender, 0=female, 1=male

<sup>c</sup>Parent’s education: higher score refers to higher number of years of education

<sup>d</sup>Family locality: 0=urban, 1=rural

### *Adolescent and Parental Perception of Family Strength*

A series of t-test were performed to evaluate differences in the perception of family strength. The result from the study revealed there were statistically significant differences between the score of family strength perceived by adolescent and parents (Table 2). In more specific, result showed that adolescents perceived lower level of family strength than the parents. Nevertheless, the result failed to detect any significant differences in the family strength between male and female adolescents. However, there was significant score differences between the father and mother perception on the family strength.

**Table 2: A descriptive statistics and t-test of family strength and adolescent emotional and behavioural adjustment**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Range</b>
Adolescent perception of family strength	142.84	11.98	104-162
Parental perception of family strength	146.50	11.07	119-162
	t-value (df)	-4.76(1059.10)***	
Male adolescent perception of family strength	142.09	12.02	121-162
Female adolescent perception of family strength	143.24	11.98	104-162
	t-value (df)	-.61(178)	
Father perception of family strength	145.55	11.91	119-162
Mother perception of family strength	147.42	10.16	128-162
	t-value (df)	-1.14(172.43)**	
Adolescent emotional and behavioural adjustment	10.03	4.53	0-24

\*\*p<.05,\*\*\*p<.001

#### *Adolescent Adjustment*

Analysis of data showed that 88.3% of the adolescents were considered as normal for the overall emotional and behavioural adjustment, while 11.7% reached borderline/abnormal levels in the SDQ total difficulties score. For the individual subscales, the highest percentage of borderline or abnormal level was reported in peer relationship problem (20%), and this followed by a lack of prosocial behaviour (18.9%), emotional symptoms (10.6%), conduct problem (10.6%) and hyperactivity/inattention (9.4%),

#### *Relationship between Family Strength and Adolescent Adjustment*

As shown in Table 3, the socio-demographics characteristics of adolescent and parents were entered as control for adolescent adjustment (Model 1). In the second model examines adolescent and parental perception of family strength were added simultaneously to determine the significant predictors for adolescent adjustments, after taking into account socio-demographic characteristics. In Model 1, socio-demographics characteristics explaining 1% of the variance in adolescent adjustment. The inclusion of adolescent and parental perception of family strength in model 2 added to the fit of the model,  $F(9,530) = 4.77, p < .001$  accounting for an additional 6% of the total variability of adjustment among adolescent. In the final model, the adolescent perception of family strength contributed substantially to the prediction of emotional and behavioural adjustment among adolescent, controlling for the preceding variables.

**Table 3: Standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ s) predicting adolescent emotional and behavioral adjustments**

Predictors	Adolescent emotional and behavioral adjustments	
	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Socio-demographic Characteristics</i>		
Adolescent's age	.02	.01
Adolescent's gender (Male)	.01	-.02
Parent's age	-.03	-.04
Parent's gender (Male)	-.02	-.02
Parent's education	.03	.05
Number of children	.04	.07
Family monthly income	-.06	-.07
<i>Family Strength</i>		
Adolescent perception of family strength		-.27***
Parental perception of family strength		.03
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-.01	.06
F	.481	4.771
F Change	.481	19.671

Note: References category is in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < .001$

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The current findings demonstrated that there were significance differences in perception of family strength between adolescents and parents. The results of this study is consistent with past findings (Gazendam-Donofrio et al., 2007, Shek, 1999) which found that adolescent perceive low level of family functioning compared to their parents. The adolescent and parents differences in family perception occur could be regarded as a sign of the individuation process of adolescents (Ohannessian et al., 1995). Data from the present study revealed that mother perceived higher levels of family strength than did father. The result of this study is contrast with the finding from Gazendam-Donofrio et al. (2007), who found that there were no significance mean differences between mother and father perception on family functioning. It is evident from the study that Malay adolescent perceptions of family strength were found to be predictor of adolescent emotional and behavioural adjustment. The importance of adolescent perceptions of family strength is consistent with previous studies (Zarnaghash, Zarnaghash, & Zarnaghash, 2013; Owrangi, Yousliani, & Zarnaghash, 2011; Nasir et al., 2010; Kim & Kim, 2008; Shek, 2005 ) who also found that adolescent perceptions of family strengths contributed unique variance in the prediction of adolescent adjustment.

The current study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the perception of family strength is measured by only one parent's perspective. Future studies could examine parental dyads which would provide perceptions of family strength from both parents. Second, the sample for this study was derived from Malay adolescent aged 13 to 18 years old, therefore, the generalizability of these findings is limited to the sample assessed. It would be of interesting if future researchers include other ethnic groups in Malaysia and do the comparison of perception of family strength between the ethnic groups. Third, this study focused on adolescents emotional and behavioural adjustments only. It would be interesting if other aspects of adolescent outcomes were also employed in this study for example academic competence, suicide attempt and delinquency behaviour.

In summary, the findings of this study emphasise the importance of adolescents perceptions of family strength. More specifically, adolescent perceptions of their family interaction processes are more important to their psychological adjustment than that of their parents. The current results provide support for both adolescent and parental report on family strength to be taken into account in future clinical studies. These results may also be of interest to those developing programme in enhancing the functioning of the family which in turn to produce the functioning of adolescent.

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