

## **WELL-BEING IN INDIAN ADOLESCENTS: ROLE OF EMOTIONAL AUTONOMY AND IDENTITY FORMATION<sup>#</sup>**

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*The objective of the present study was to examine the role of emotional autonomy and identity formation in the well-being of Indian adolescents. For this purpose, a sample of 400 adolescents (200 boys and 200 girls) ranging in age from 16 to 21 years, were selected from various colleges of city Amritsar (India). The sample was administered various psychological tools to measure well-being, emotional autonomy, and the identity statuses. The correlational analyses suggested that for both boys' and girls' sample, all dimensions of emotional autonomy and the identity statuses of achievement and moratorium have significant positive correlations with well-being, whereas the identity statuses of foreclosure and diffusion have shown an inverse relationship with well-being. Step-Wise Multiple Regression Analyses revealed that variables contributing positively to the well-being of both adolescent boys and girls are individuation, nondependency on parents, and identity achievement, whereas identity diffusion contributes negatively to the well-being of both boys and girls. Moratorium status seems to be playing a positive role in the well-being of adolescent girls, whereas foreclosure status contributes negatively to the well-being of adolescent boys.*

Adolescence has been considered as a stage associated with substantial change in self because of various biological, emotional, intellectual, and societal challenges accompanying this stage. Psychosocial maturity characterized in terms of the emergence of a competent, autonomous, and well-integrated sense of self leads to healthy psychosocial outcomes, while an inability to conceptualize one's self as a distinct individual may hinder adolescents adaptive functioning.

Being autonomous and framing or achieving one's identity are the chief developmental tasks of adolescent years. Because today's

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adolescents spend so much time away from the direct supervision of adults, either by themselves or with their peers. Learning how to govern their own selves in a responsible fashion is a crucial task of contemporary youth. During adolescence, there is a movement away from the dependency typical of childhood towards the autonomy typical of adulthood. Also, relinquishing childish dependencies on parents in favour of more mature, more responsible, and less dependent relationships, significantly adds to the adolescents sense of self. But the growth of autonomy and its implications for adolescent's well-being are often misunderstood. Autonomy is often confused with rebellion; and becoming an independent person is often equated with breaking away from the relationships and distancing oneself from cold and conflictual families (Freud, 1958; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). It has been suggested that gaining autonomy may be taxing for the adolescents as the disagreements over autonomy-related concerns are at the top of the list of things that provoke quarrels between adolescents and their parents (Steinberg, 2001). Researchers have also associated adolescents' emotional autonomy with insecurity and increased feelings of rejection for the parents (Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Steinberg & Steinberg, 1994).

As an alternative to the detachment perspective of emotional autonomy, some theorists have suggested the development of emotional autonomy in terms of adolescents developing sense of individuation, and that adolescents can become emotionally autonomous from their parents without becoming detached from them (Collins, 1990; Grotevant, 1997); and that close family relationships foster healthy individuation and high mental health in adolescents (Allen, Hauser, Eickhalt, Bell, & O'Conner, 1994; Bomar & Sabatelli, 1996). Others also report that individuation has positive effects on adolescents' mental health and responsible functioning (see, for example, Josselson, 1980; Ryan & Lynch, 1989); and difficulty in individuating may lead to depression, anxiety, and diminished social competence in adolescents (Allen & McElhancy, 2000; Holmbeck et al., 2000).

Identity formation in adolescence has been found to be deeply associated with psychological well-being. Erikson (1968) suggested that identity is ideally experienced as sense of well-being, and those who have a secure identity, feel 'at home' with themselves, and are confident about knowing their place and direction in life. An individual in his or her identity strives to feel good about the self, which when achieved, results in happiness. Identity confusion, on the other hand, is characterized by incoherent, disjointed, and incomplete sense of self. It can vary in degree from a mild state of not knowing

who one is, to a more severe psychopathological condition that persists beyond a normal range of exploration. Research suggests that a lack of direction and purpose in life and an unconcern for important issues (identity diffusion) is associated with many maladaptive patterns ranging from mild emotional problems to severe psychopathology (Ball & Chandler, 1989; Sandhu & Tung, 2004; White & Jones, 1996). Research also points out towards lesser well-being in adolescents who are currently exploring identity issues (moratorium status), however evidence is also available to the contrary (see, for example, Bishop, Macy-Lewis, Schneklath, Puswella, & Struessel, 1987; Meeus, Iedema, & Vollebergh, 1999; Raphael, Feinberg, Bachor, 1987).

Most importantly, the social context in which adolescents attempt to establish themselves as autonomous and unique, exerts a tremendous impact on the nature and outcome of this process. The cultures where control and connectedness are a prescribed norm (e.g., India) may not easily approve of the adolescents growing needs to be self-directing individuals, thereby putting a dent on their well-being. Thus keeping in mind the mixed results of the research about the relationship of well-being with emotional autonomy and identity formation, this research was designed to clearly understand this issue in Indian adolescents.

## METHOD

### Sample

The sample comprised 400 Indian college students of city Amritsar (200 boys and 200 girls) ranging in age from 16 to 21 years with a mean age of 18.25 years for boys, and 18.32 years for girls. The participants belonged more or less to similar socio-economic strata. The sample was obtained using random sampling technique.

### Instruments

#### *PGI Well Being Scale*

PGI Well-being Scale was developed by Verma et al. (1986). This scale measures subjective well-being or positive mental health. It is a 20 items scale and the time limit is 5-8 minutes. The participants have to mark 'right' or 'wrong' as the response options. The total number of marked items is the total score. The score can range from 0 to 20. Higher score means that the individual is higher on well-being. Inter-rater reliability of the test is .86, and has a test-retest reliability of .84.

### *Emotional Autonomy Scale*

Emotional Autonomy Scale was developed by Steinberg and Silverberg (1986). This 20 items scale measures the emotional autonomy of the individuals on four dimensions namely deidealization of parents (score range 1-5), nondependency on parents (score range 1-4), individuation (score range 1-5), and perceiving parents as people (score range 1-6). The participants had to indicate their response to each item on a four point likert-type scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The test-retest reliability of the scale ( $N=50$ ), for a 15 days period of time, ranges from 0.69 to 0.83 for various dimensions. The test has been successfully used on Indian adolescents by Graf (2003).

### *Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status-2*

This instrument was developed by Bennion and Adams (1986). This test measures identity formation on two domains: ideological domain (which includes areas like occupation, religion, politics, and philosophical life style) and interpersonal domain (which covers areas like friendship, recreation, dating, and sex roles). Only the areas of friendship and recreation were studied in the interpersonal domain, and the areas of dating and sex roles were excluded because of their inappropriateness for Indian adolescents. Both the domains measure each participant on four identity statuses, namely identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. The participants responded by giving their degree of agreement with each item on a six point scales ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. In the present study, the scores on both the domains were added to yield total identity scores on four statuses, for each subject. The scores for each status ranged from 12 to 72. Test-Retest reliability ranged from 0.73 to 0.91 over a 15 days period, for different statuses. The test has been successfully used on Indian adolescents by Graf (2003).

### **Procedure**

The above measures were administered in classrooms under constant supervision, and standard instructions as given in the respective manuals were followed.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

To study the relationship of well-being with identity formation and emotional autonomy, all variables were correlated by applying

appropriate correlation analysis techniques and were further subjected to Step-Wise Multiple Regression Analysis to check the contribution of each independent variable towards the dependent variable.

### Correlational Analysis

The correlations between well-being and the four identity statuses and the different dimensions of emotional autonomy are given in Tables 1 and 2 for boys and girls, respectively.

Table 1

*Regression coefficients, Correlations, and F-ratios of Boys Sample (N=200)*

S. No.	Variables added	R.C.	R <sup>2</sup>	r	F
1	Diffusion	-.18	.48	-.69**	160**
2	Individuation	.32	.80	.68**	320**
3	Deidealization of Parents	.23	.80	.59**	0
4	Nondependency on Parents	.03	.81	.42**	11.11**
5	Identity Achievement	.12	.85	.40**	50**
6	Perceiving Parents as People	.07	.85	.36**	0
7	Foreclosure	-.06	.86	-.30**	14.3**
8	Moratorium	.04	.86	.18**	0

\*\* $p < 0.01$

Table 2

*Regression coefficients, Correlations, and F-ratios of Girls Sample (N=200)*

S.No	Variables added	R.C.	R <sup>2</sup>	r	F
1	Individuation	.12	.43	.65**	143.3**
2	Diffusion	-.21	.76	-.59**	330**
3	Nondependency on Parents	.23	.77	.58**	10**
4	Deidealization of Parents	.04	.77	.57**	0
5	Identity Achievement	.18	.83	.52**	75**
6	Perceiving Parents as People	.04	.83	.38**	0
7	Foreclosure	.01	.83	-.35**	0
8	Moratorium	.09	.84	.18**	12.5**

\*\* $p < 0.01$



It is evident from Table 1 and 2 that well-being has significant positive correlations with all dimensions of emotional autonomy in boys' as well as in the girls' sample. This suggests that individuation, nondependency on parents, deidealization of parents, and perception of parents as people is not associated with any threat to the well-being of adolescents. Adolescents who have emotionally weaned themselves from their parents also depict higher subjective mental health. Being able to free oneself from excessive emotional dependence on parents accompanies better mental health in adolescent boys and girls.

Table 1 and 2 also suggest that well-being has significant positive correlations with identity achievement and moratorium, while it has inverse correlations with foreclosure and diffusion statuses. This reveals that adolescent's experimentation with different identity issues, or commitment to life tasks after going through an exploratory period is associated with higher well-being; whereas lack of concern about one's life tasks or premature commitment to them without self-exploration accompanies lesser well-being in adolescents. Seemingly, framing one's own identity and knowing one's own direction in life is associated with positive outcomes, whereas lower identity statuses do not indicate positive life orientation in Indian adolescents.

### **Step-Wise Multiple Regression Analysis**

A step-wise multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the amount of variance in the dependent variable (well-being) that could be accounted for by the different variables (dimensions of emotional autonomy and identity statuses) and the impact of each independent variable in the prediction of the dependent variable. Results of the regression analysis reveal that for the boys' sample, 86% of the variance is explained by the selected variables, and for the girls' sample, 84% of the variance is explained by the selected variables. In order to delineate the variable significantly contributing towards the dependent variable, *F*-ratios were calculated and the level of significance was checked. The results of regression analysis and *F*-ratios are also given in Table 1 and 2 for boys and girls respectively.

The results of the regression analysis suggests that the emotional autonomy dimensions which contribute positively to the well-being of both adolescent boys and girls are individuation, and nondependency on parents (Table 1 and Table 2). Seemingly, individuation and non dependency on parents' dimensions of emotional autonomy play an important role in the well-being of adolescent boys and girls. This suggests that adolescents' well-being is influenced to a large extent by

their increasing self-responsibility for what they do and what they are, rather than depositing this responsibility on the shoulders of those under whose influence and tutelage they have grown up. A progressive sharpening of one's sense of self as autonomous, competent, and separate from one's parents leads to healthy psychological effects on adolescents. On the other hand, adolescents who have not yet relinquished their childish dependencies on parents or who have lesser self-governance are more vulnerable to lesser well-being. Various researchers have also suggested that individuation has positive effects on adolescents mental health (Allen, et al., 1994; Chen & Dornbusch, 1998; Fuhrman & Holmbeck, 1995). It has also been found that autonomous adolescents are quite close to their families, enjoy doing things with their parents, have fewer familial conflicts; whereas rebellion, negativism, and excessive involvement in the peer group are more common among psychologically immature adolescents. Lesser autonomy in adolescents or over protectiveness of adolescents by the parents has already been reported to be linked to depression, anxiety, and diminished self-competence (Holmbeck, et al., 2000; Josselson, Greenberger, & McConchie, 1977; Kandel & Lesser, 1972).

Identity formation has also emerged as a significant contributor towards the well-being of adolescent boys and girls. Achieving one's own identity after passing through a period of exploration and evaluation, engenders positive outcomes in adolescent boys and girls, whereas a lack of a direction, lack of commitments to various life tasks, and lack of knowing one's place in society makes adolescent boys and girls vulnerable to maladaptive life course. Research suggests that identity achievement is experienced as a sense of psychological well-being, whose most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one's body, and a sense of knowing where one is going. Similarly, Nammalvar and Rao (1983) suggest that an integrated identity may fortify the ego and strengthen its defenses to cope with problems. Also identity achievement has been found to be linked to psychological well-being (Berzonsky, Macek, & Nurmi, 2003; Goldman, Masterson, Locke, & Groth, 2002).

Table 2 suggests that moratorium status contributes positively to the well-being of adolescent girls. Girls who are considering and exploring issues pertaining to occupation, religion, politics, and interpersonal arena have higher positive orientation and mental health. Trying out various roles imparts a sense of confidence to adolescents and keeps them focused on the construction of their lives. However, lack of exploration of identity and lesser concern about achieving ones identity does not indicate well-being in adolescent girls. Similarly

Raphael et al. (1987) have found moratorium subjects to be highest on mental health.

However, identity diffusion seems to be contributing negatively to the well-being of both adolescent boys and girls. Lack of psychosocial maturity and indifference to important life issues may weigh heavily on their sense of personal worth, confidence, and well-being. Identity diffused youth just seem to be drifting with time without holding on to firm value-base or to their unique set of choices. Such adolescents may slowly deviate from the mainstream and may fall into the vicious trap of delinquency, drug abuse, alcoholism, emotional disturbance, alienation, suicidal tendencies, and other forms of psychopathology (Ball & Chandler, 1989; Sandhu & Tung, 2004; Taylor & Goritsas, 1994; White & Jones, 1996).

It is also evident from Table 1 that foreclosure status of identity formation also contributes to lesser well-being in adolescent boys. Boys who prematurely commit themselves to life goals according to their parents' expectations or according to the choices of other authority figures without realization of their true selves or without going through a decision-making process are more vulnerable to lesser psychological health. Following ones parental choices at the cost of ones individual set of goals, values, and beliefs may be maladaptive for adolescent boys, and does not generate feelings of self-satisfaction, confidence, and positive life orientation. Other researchers, similarly, have not considered foreclosure to be a healthy and an adaptive status (see, for example, Wires, Barocas, & Hollenbeck, 1994).

Conclusively, it can be said that emotional autonomy and identity formation are significant contributors towards the well-being of adolescent boys and girls. Increased psychosocial maturity characterized by individuation, lesser dependence on parents, along with achievement of ones unique identity contributes positively to the well-being of adolescent boys and girls. For girls, moratorium status enhances their well being, while foreclosure status contributes negatively to the well-being of boys.

Furthermore, looking at the amount of variance (Boys=86%, Girls=84%), explained by these independent variables, it is pertinent to point out that emotional autonomy and identity formation are important contributors to the well-being of Indian adolescents. The results highlight that individuation and autonomy should not be confused with rebellion, or considered unhealthy for adolescent development. Rather, it indicate positive attributes in adolescents. Thus, adolescents mental health or positive life orientation depends to a large part on their ability to master psychosocial tasks of



adolescence. Although the results seem to be relevant for Indian adolescents at least, further researches on a larger sample, especially encompassing rural adolescents can throw more light on this issue.

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