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Adolescents perception on parent child conflict and its resolution: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent period is marked by strain in relationship and misunderstanding with parents. Understanding perception of adolescents about this issue is necessary for conflict resolution. The current study is aimed at exploring adolescent perception on nature of parent child conflict and the strategies for resolving such problems.

A qualitative study was conducted among 150 (60 females & 90 males) college students in late adolescence period. Three colleges were conveniently selected in Kathmandu. Semi-structured questions were asked to the participant adolescents. They were asked to list on common issues or problems with their parents and type of parental behavior which would facilitate in resolving conflict. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis method.

Seven main themes emerged in the sources of conflict in parent adolescent relationship. They are lack of warmth, acceptance and understanding, restriction in personal freedom and imposing control, comparison and discrimination, conflicting messages (double bind communication), unduly focus on adolescents' negative behavior, over emphasis on studies and unreasonable aggression/ lack of trust. Regarding strategies to mitigate conflict, participants' suggestion for parents were analyzed into themes of listening and empathic understanding, freedom, flexibility, forgiveness and not discriminating.

These themes on sources of conflict and strategies in resolution could be utilized by parents and adolescents in building healthy relationship.

Keywords: Adolescent, Conflict, Parent Child Relationship, Resolution, Kathmandu

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is the period of transition from childhood to early adulthood that starts approximately from 10 to 12 years of age and ends at about 18 to 22 years.[1] However, there is disagreement in exact age at which people enter and complete adolescence period. For example APA (2002) has described 10 to 18 years as defining line of adolescence[2] while for World Health Organization it is from age 10-19.[3] UNICEF considers 10-14 as early adolescence and 15-19 as late adolescence.[4] Even though age demarcating adolescence is controversial, it is the developmental stage in which the person is neither a child nor an adult. Also, it is the period in which individual moves from dependency to autonomy and independence. Adolescent comprises 16% of world's population[5] and about 22% of population of Nepal.[6]

Adolescence is the period of rapid developmental changes in which biological change often precede psychological maturity. The speed of physical,

emotional and intellectual development creates a challenge for adolescents to adjust with body and identity.[7] This is period in which person recollects positive experiences like ambition and independence and negative experiences like anxiety, worries and conflict.[8] Thus, adolescence demands special attention as well as protection.[4]

Adolescence has often referred as negative developmental stage as many of the adolescence are in high-risk activities and rebel against their parents' wishes or expectations and life for many adolescents is a painful clash filled with mixed messages and conflicting demands from parents, teachers, friends, family and oneself.[9]

Anna Freud (1958) labeled adolescence as stage of stress and storm with assertion that, "to be normal during adolescence is itself abnormal." Arnett (1999) argued that conflict with parents, mood disruption and risk behaviors are three key elements in describing adolescence as difficult period of life. Also, substance abuse and deviances like juvenile offense are key negative outcomes in life of some adolescents.[10]

The change in parent-adolescent relationship is one of the most important transitions during adolescence and this transition provides opportunities for growth as well as problems.[11] Adolescence is often marked by lack of proper communication between parent and offspring,[12] distorted relationship with parents and negative attitude toward parents. Peers are closer than parents at this stage of development and children often actively protest hierarchies in families.

Even though some conflict with parents at this stage can be normal, it can have number of negative consequences to adolescence including lowered psychological adjustment,[13] higher mental health issues including substance abuse,[14] increased risk taking behavior,[15] and poor academic performance. As poor parent adolescent relationship has immediate and long term negative consequences, parents need to handle their children properly.

Parents are often blamed for issues of their children; however less has been focused on their training to handle children's behavior. Knowing the children's perspective about parents, and the conflicts with parents could be valuable insight for parents who are struggling to cope with adolescent children. However, there is scarce research work in this regards. The present study thus aimed at exploring what issues were highlighted by adolescents regarding problem with their parents. The study also focused on exploring type of behavior of parents that adolescents perceive as beneficial in reducing problem with parents.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Sample of the present study included 150 students (60 female & 90 male) studying in Bachelor level in four different colleges of Kathmandu in Nepal. The colleges included Nepal Mega College, Triton international College, Premier College and Uniglobe College. The participants were students of either humanities or management faculty. The age of students ranged from 17 through 19. Colleges were selected through convenience sampling procedure and students who were in their late adolescence and willing to grant consent were selected as sample of the study.

Semi-structured questions were asked to participant adolescents. They were asked to list on common issues or problems with their parents as well as the nature of parental behavior triggering conflict and type of parental behavior which facilitate in resolving conflict among the adolescents and the parents. Necessary probing and elaboration was performed during data collection.

Collected data was entered and coded in Microsoft Excel. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis method, a method of extracting themes from qualitative data. Six-step model proposed by Barun and Clarke (2006) was used.[16] After developing initial codes, themes were generated, reviewed and defined.

RESULTS

This study tried to explore the strain in parent-adolescent relationship from perspective of adolescents. Also, adolescents' perspective on issue resolution was explored. This section is arranged according to themes on these two areas.

Problem Areas

After coding, theme generation and analysis, seven main themes emerged in the sources of conflict in parent adolescent relationship. They are lack of warmth, acceptance and understanding, restriction in personal freedom and imposing control, comparison and discrimination, conflicting messages (double bind communication), unduly focus on adolescents' negative behavior, over emphasis on studies and unreasonable aggression/ lack of trust. They are elaborated below:

Lack of Warmth, Acceptance and Understanding:

The first theme revolved around listening and understanding. Adolescents reported that parents are cold, unfriendly, do not listen to them and disrespect their opinion. Adolescents also opined that parents are egocentric and make decision about them without their interest. Majority of the students expressed a sense of generation gap between their parents and themselves as parents were unable to adapt to changing lifestyle and society. Some adolescent considered their parents insensitive as they were often harassed in public.

Restriction in Personal Freedom and Imposing Control:

The participants shared that the parents were overly restricting personal freedom of adolescents and did impose control over them. Boundaries were set in watching TV, using gadgets, going for party, hanging with friends and selection of peer. Most of the adolescents reported that parents were very strict about late night arrival. For many adolescents, conflict begins when parents impose their view and try to dictate most of the time. They had difficulty sharing their problem and feelings with parents due to overly strict nature of parents. They had little to decide on food, dress up and selection of profession and even choice of life partner. One male student was very concerned due to parental pressure to marry in early age while another in conflict with parent due to their pressure to get job. One female student compared her life to that of the people during 'curfew' while another female considered her as a 'prisoner'. One male student appraised control of parent as 'torture' and one female student frequently had thought of 'running out of home'.

Comparison and Discrimination:

Comparison with other people and discrimination was another theme of concern. Many adolescents reported that they were humiliated by comparison with other people in their neighborhood or their siblings. Also they shared about being discriminated. For male participants, discrimination was primarily due to poor study habit and academic achievement. For female participants, discrimination was primarily due to their gender. Many girls complained that parents were giving more privilege to boys. Boys were waived for misdeeds, granted more pocket money and got more consideration when conflict aroused between girls and boys. One female participant reported that parents always treated her as a boy and overtly expressed their wishes that it would be better if she were a boy.

Conflicting Messages (Double Bind Communication):

Parental communication of conflicting messages was another theme. Adolescents reported that parents sometimes considered them as kids overprotecting them and undermining their voice, while at other times expected them as grownup when they make any mistakes.

Unduly Focus on Adolescents' Negative Behavior and Lack of Trust:

One of the important themes emerged was parental greater sensitivity to negative behavior of adolescents. Many adolescents reported that parent were only focused on mistakes of adolescents and did not acknowledge their accomplishments. Also, parents were keen in magnifying mistakes. After adolescent committed any mistakes parents would remind them about their past misdeeds and tried to embarrass them. Parents would nag about their

friend circle, and this has been major source of conflict.

Lack of trust on adolescent was one main theme of conflict. Many adolescents reported that parents did not trust the ability of children to choose career, life partner and peers. Parents often blamed children for bad company and abuse of pocket money they get. Also, false accusation of abuse of gadget by children contributed in parent-adolescent conflict. For example, one adolescent reported that parents often blamed for playing games while he was completing assignment on laptop. One student reported that parents always looked for personal belongings like mobile and purse without his permission and conflict always started there.

Over Emphasis on Studies:
Most of the adolescents were concerned about parental overemphasis on their studies. According to them, parents did not show any interest in extracurricular activities in which the adolescents were interested in. Parents were not flexible enough to consider children to enjoy life activities beyond study.

Unreasonable Aggression and Lack of Trust:
Unreasonable aggression was one of the concerns. Adolescents believed that parents were short tempered, expressed aggression in almost minor issues. Even without listening, parents were prompt in exhibiting aggression.

Some other factors contributed in parent adolescent conflict were, parental conflict, spending insufficient time with adolescent and substance abuse.

Strategies to Mitigate Conflict
Participants also proposed some conflict resolution strategies to the parents who are raising their adolescents. Their themes were listening and empathic understanding, freedom, flexibility, forgiveness and not discriminating; these strategies could mitigate parent-adolescent conflict to great extent.

Listening and Empathetic Understanding:
Adolescents believed that most of the issues with the parents would be resolved if parent could listen to their children without passing judgment on them and their peers. Adolescents opined that parents need to understand from point of view of adolescents rather than imposing their own feelings. Explicit acknowledgment of worth of children, respect for the opinion of children and friendly environment could mitigate conflict to large extent, according to adolescents. Listening to children rather than getting carried away with comments or complaints from other people, and not scolding children in presence of other people were other aspects.

Issue of Freedom for Adolescents and Flexibility of the Parents:
Getting freedom was one of the desperate needs of almost every adolescent. Adolescents believed that parents should minimize restrictions and maximize freedom to their children. Adolescents also proposed that parents should let grown up adolescents decide their destiny to avoid blame in future. They also suggested parents to be more flexible in what adolescents do, the peer they choose to hang on, dress they wear and career decision they make.

Forgiveness and Acceptance:
Adolescents also held that forgiveness in small misdeed can help mitigate frequent conflict. Adolescents believed that parents should train children good behavior rather than scolding for not exhibiting the same. They recommended parents not to humiliate children in public for mistakes and failure. Adolescents opined that trusting and accepting own children and their decision can resolve conflicts. Parents should also accept that time has changed and they should not always compare own adolescent times with current generation. Also, parents should accept the decision they made including friends, life partner and occupation. Many adolescent believed that acceptance of decision of children leads to 'no regret' in future.

Not Discriminating:
Adolescents suggested parents not to discriminate children on the basis of gender or exam grade they

secure. They also suggested that parents should not compare their children with those of others. They believed that parents should be satisfied with their children as they are. Many girls proposed equal treatment among boys and girls.

Other Mitigating Factors:
Other factors suggested were reduction of unnecessary anger, giving adequate pocket money, acceptance of intimate partner of adolescent, giving enough time to children and praising on small deeds.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Result showed that adolescents perceived their parents as relatively low in accepting adolescents and their voice. This can be explained by the fact that parents from Asian collectivistic cultures are more authoritarian (high on demanding and low in acceptance) in nature.[17,18] Cold and unaccepting behavior of parent can result in higher anxiety and depression among adolescent.[19] Also, adolescents' perception of low parental warmth has been linked with poor school adjustment[20] and shyness.[21] Public humiliation of adolescents by parent reported is common practice in Nepal, as such humiliation as well as corporal punishment is thought to be necessary in discipling and facilitating learning among children.[22] Sense of generation gap reported by adolescents is also documented in previous studies.[23]

Perception of adolescents struggle to get freedom was consistent with the claim of Hasmi (2013) that sense of control is one of the center of parent adolescent conflict.[9] Buzzetta (2012) also revealed that one center of battle is to obtain freedom and autonomy.[24] Control exerted by parents might be function of their own experience with parenting.[25] Restricting adolescents' freedom and imposing control is thought to have a detrimental impact on children's wellbeing,[26] can result in shyness,[21] or contribute conduct disorder, low self-esteem and depression.[27] Too much psychological control over adolescence can also result in strained relationship.[28] Parental over concern in late night arrival reported in present study can be however a culturally consistent behavior by parents as late night wandering is considered as a kind of deviant behavior in South Asian perspective.

Comparison is human instinct and thus comparison made by parent is a part of this, however comparison can have detrimental influence on children[29] and it is not a good measure of assessing progress of children.[30] Similarly, negative comments and judgments passed by parents might be well intentioned at times, but this might indicate lack of proper skill to articulate such intention by the parents. Result also showed that perception of discrimination was prevalent among both male and female adolescents. Most of the female adolescents' perception of gender based discrimination was consistent with the finding of Pokharel (2009).[31] Niaz & Hassan (2006) also reported that marked gender discrimination was prevalent in South Asia and it led to second class status of women in society.[32] Male child is considered as "*bansha chalaune*" (the one who run the generation), and this might be a reason for such discrimination. In current study, male participants shared discrimination only based on the academic performance; this can also indicate that parents are concerned about 'the ones who run their generation'. Many female participants proposed 'no discrimination in terms of gender of children' as one way in mitigating conflict with parents.

Conflict of parent and children was also due to communication of conflicting messages by parents. Conveying contradictory message can result in inability of adolescents to understand actual intention of parents. Good parent-adolescent communication in contrary results in family proximity and more love and flexibility in resolving family problems.[33] Parental doubt on adolescents' abilities can lower self-esteem and a sense of rebellion.

A tendency to focus more on negative than positive information is common cognitive distortion; and parents have this tendency. Cultural legitimation of violence as mean of fostering discipline in children in Nepal might be a factor contributing in over sensitivity of parents in negative behavior of children. This might also be due to the selective attention of adolescents toward negative behavior of parents.

The result might be because parent and adolescents have different perception of parental responsiveness, demandingness and parental control.[34]

Many parents these days have understood the importance of education in life of children and prestige of family. This might be the reason why parent put pressure on children regarding study. Riley (2003) also reported that adolescents are under strong family pressure to excel academically.[19] Parental pressure however can result in increased test anxiety[35] and decreased study motivation in adolescents.

When parents perceive own child as unpleasant, this can result in aggression towards children.[36] In current study, many adolescents shared about parental aggression. Such punitive behavior of parent can contribute in low self-efficacy of children.[36]

Students proposed themes of empathic understanding, freedom, flexibility, forgiveness and not discriminating for mitigating parent-adolescent conflict. Empathic understanding and non-judgmental attitude, which adolescent recommended parents to adopt, are two key factors in successful interpersonal relationship. In this sense, adolescents are relatively mature enough to understand factors influencing human relationship. Expectation of explicit acknowledgment of worth and compliment from parent is consistent with the basic human need of worth.

Freedom, flexibility and forgiveness is desirable in every human relationship. Freedom to choose often becomes main factor in parent-adolescent relationship and freedom can make adolescents less free[37] because of the addition of responsibility that comes with choices made. Even though there is controversy over how much freedom children should get, there is agreement in that freedom is desperate need of every human being. Similarly, parental forgiveness is significantly related with parent-adolescent relationship.[38] Opinion of adolescents that parent should not humiliate them in public emphasizes how much important to them is their social value.

This study explored into few aspects of parent adolescent conflict. First, parent adolescent conflicts are largely universal as mentioned in literature.[9,28] Second, conflict centers on various relationship factors and attitude of trust mentioned in counseling literature (e.g., relationship factors mentioned by Rogers). Third, adolescent are sensitive and mature enough to understand the ways in which human relationship can grow; and their view can be utilized in conflict resolution.

This is an exploration utilizing adolescents' view. This study however, could not acknowledge parental stance upon the dynamics of relationship with adolescents. Parental view on the same issue could bring a complete picture of stressors and possible mitigating factors in parent-adolescent relationship.

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