

Perceived Social Support and Parental Stress among Married Couples: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: *In this research paper, the researcher describes a mixed-method study designed to explore perceived social support and parental stress among married couples within the Indian context. Specifically, a thematic analysis of open-ended responses was conducted to questions about the extent of social support received by the participants with respect to parental stress. A correlation study was also conducted on 101 participants to understand the relationship between social support and parental stress, an independent sample T-test to check gender differences, and ANOVA to check mean differences between social support and parental stress, the tool used included Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and Parental Stress Scale (PSS). The qualitative results indicate that a moderately negative correlation exists between the variables perceived social support and parental stress among married couples. Thus, higher levels of social support lead to lower levels of parental stress. Additionally, a significant gender difference exists in parental stress among married couples, with females reporting greater levels of stress than males. Whereas, no significant gender difference exists with respect to perceived social support among married couples. Whereas, the findings of mean differences in parental stress among married couples based on the number of children they have, indicate that there is no significant difference. The qualitative analysis, on the other hand, identifies major themes and implements that holistic care approaches along with empowerment systems must be encouraged if the complexities of parenthood have to be dealt with adequately. Implications, limitations, and directions for further research are discussed.*

Keywords: Perceived social support, Parental stress, mixed method, correlation, t-test, ANOVA, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Perceived social support and parental stress play crucial roles in the dynamics of married couples. Research has shown that perceived social support can moderate the association between marital status and psychological well-being (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015). Parental stress is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has been extensively studied in various contexts. Parental stress refers to the psychological and emotional distress experienced by parents as a result of the demanding responsibilities and challenges associated with raising children. This stress can arise from various factors, including financial pressures, juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, conflicts in parenting styles, and the demands of meeting a child's physical, emotional, and developmental needs. Additionally, parental stress can be influenced by individual factors such as personality traits, coping styles, and self-esteem. Research has shown that parenting stress is influenced by factors such as parental mental health, physical disability, child behavior problems, and the level of parental involvement with children (Pinquart, 2017; Deater-Deckard, 1998; Bloomfield & Kendall, 2012). There are several reasons why an investigation on the connection between married couples' perceived social support and parental stress is important and necessary. First of all, as it has a major effect on both spouses' general well-being, it is imperative to comprehend the dynamics of social support in married partnerships. To improve family resilience and coping strategies, it is important to look into how perceived social support reduces parental stress. Paternal stress is also a widespread problem that influences family dynamics and child development in addition to affecting mental health in individuals. This study aims to investigate the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support. The findings of this research can be used to develop interventions and programmes that improve parental efficacy, marital

satisfaction, and family harmony. This study is pertinent in addressing the complex dynamics of modern family life because it highlights the need to alter research paradigms to reflect the present issues experienced by married couples as societal standards and family structures change.

2. Statement of problem

The current research paper attempts to study the correlation between perceived social support and parental stress, and to understand the extent of social support among married couples through a qualitative study.

2.1 Objectives

- To study the relationship between perceived social support and parental stress among married couples.
- To study gender differences in perceived social support and parental stress among married couples.
- The study aims to explore the impact of the number on parental stress experienced by married couples.
- To understand the extent of social support received by both the parents from family, friends and significant others.

2.2 Hypothesis

- H1: There will be no significant relationship between perceived social support and parental stress among married couples.
- H2: There will be no significant gender difference between perceived social support and parental stress among married couples.

- H3: There will be no significant difference in parental stress among married couples based on the number of children they have.

3. Methodology / Approach

An exploratory study method integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively investigate the correlation between perceived social support and parental stress, and to understand the extent of social support among married couples in the Indian context. The study involves a sample of 101 parents chosen through convenient sampling for the quantitative segment, while 8 individuals are randomly selected for qualitative interviews.

3.1 Data collection

The data was collected from married couples from different regions of South India through google forms and semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed using IBM SPSS-25 version.

3.1.1 Inclusion criteria: Married individuals belonging to the age group of 25-55 years old and must have children (minimum 1 child).

3.1.2 Exclusion criteria: Unmarried couples who are in a live-in relationship.

3.1.3 Research ethics followed: An informed consent was shared in which details regarding the researchers and the study were clearly mentioned. The subject's identity and all the information provided will be kept strictly confidential and might be used for academic or research purposes only.

3.2 Tools for the study:

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS): The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) developed by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, (1988) ; a 12-item instrument designed to measure perceived social support from three sources- Family, friends and significant others. It assesses the extent to which respondents perceive social support from each of these sources and is divided into 3 subscales- Family (items 3,4,8,11); Friends (items 6,7,9,12) and Significant others (items 1,2,5,10). The MSPSS is short, easy to use, self-explanatory, and time-effective. The responses are elicited on a 7-Likert point scale ranging from 1 (Very strongly disagree) to 7 (Very strongly agree). It is scored by summing individual item scores for the total and subscale scores and dividing by the number of items. Higher scores reflect higher social support.

Parental Stress Scale (PSS): The Parental Stress Scale (PSS) was Developed by Berry & Jones, (1995) as an alternative to the 101-item Parenting Stress Index. It considers both the pros as well as cons of parenting while attempting to gauge the stress levels that parents encounter. The PSS is an 18-item self-report scale where the items represent positive e.g. positive (emotional rewards, personal growth) and negative (resource needs, limitations) aspects of parenthood. The responses are elicited on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from

1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with some items being reversely scored. Overall, possible scores on the scale range from 18-90, with higher scores indicating greater parental stress.

3.3 Statistical Analysis: Statistical techniques used are correlation analysis to understand the relationship between perceived social support and parental stress, T-test to understand the difference between the variables, ANOVA to analyze the difference between means of number and age of children, and thematic analysis to identify the recurring themes and patterns.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1: Showing descriptive statistics of Perceived Social Support and Parental Stress

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceived Social Support	101	68.37	11.347
Parental Stress	101	35.49	8.198

The findings derived from descriptive statistics data indicate that the mean score for Perceived Social Support is 68.37 with a standard deviation of 11.347, and the mean score for Parental Stress is 35.49 with a standard deviation of 8.198.

H1: There will be no significant relationship between perceived social support and parental stress among married couples.

Table 2: Showing the correlation between Perceived Social Support and Parental Stress among married couples.

	N	M	SD	r	p
PSS	101	68.37	11.347	-.410**	.000
PS	101	35.49	8.198		

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 presents the findings that demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between social support and parental stress between married couples. The correlation coefficient 'r', which was calculated using the Pearson correlation test, is statistically significant at 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient of -.410 suggests that perceived social support and parental stress are moderately negatively correlated. The negative sign suggests that as PSS increases PS tends to decrease, and vice versa. The p-value 0.01 is less than 0.05, indicating that the null hypothesis which states that 'there will be no significant relationship between perceived social support and parental stress among married couples' is rejected.

H2: There will be no significant gender difference between perceived social support and parental stress among married couples.

Table 3: Showing gender difference based on Perceived Social Support and Parental Stress among married couples

	Gender	N	M	SD	t	p
PSS	Male	68	69.22	10.741	1.087	.280
	Female	33	66.61	12.492		
PSS	Male	68	34.10	8.060	-2.495	.014
	Female	33	38.33	7.849		

The gender difference in perceived social support and parental stress among matrimonial couples is broken out in Table 3. An Independent Sample t-test was conducted and the findings show that for perceived social support, Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) for males is 69.22 and 10.741 respectively, while for females it is 66.61 and 12.492. The t-value of 1.087 indicates that there is no significant difference in perceived social support between males and females among married couples. This is supported by the p-value of .280, which is greater than the significance level of 0.05. Therefore, we accept the null hypothesis, suggesting that there is no significant gender difference in the perceived social support among married couples. For parental stress, Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) for males is 34.10 and 8.060 respectively, while for females it is 38.33 and 7.849. The t-value of -2.495 indicates that there is a significant difference in parental stress between males and females among married couples. This is supported by the p-value of .014, which is less than the significance level of 0.05. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis, indicating that there is a significant gender difference in parental stress among married couples. Therefore, H2, which posits ‘no significant gender difference between perceived social support and parental stress among married couples’, is accepted for perceived social support and rejected for parental stress.

H3: There will be no significant difference in parental stress among married couples based on the number of children they have.

Table 4: Showing mean difference in Parental Stress among married couples based on number of children

Table 4 presents the findings of mean differences in parental stress among married couples based on the number of

children they have. One-way ANOVA test was conducted and the results reveal that the sum of squares (SS) between groups, which represents the variability in parental stress attributed to the number of children, is 47.978, the degrees of freedom (df) for between groups is 2, indicating the number of groups being compared and the mean square (MS) which is calculated by dividing SS by df, resulting in 23.989. Whereas, the SS within groups, representing the variability in parental stress within each group, is 6673.250, with 98 df and the MS which is 68.094. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted, as the f-value (0.352) is less than the critical value of 0.05.

Existing literature consistently demonstrates a significant difference in stress levels between mothers and fathers, with mothers having significantly higher stress scores. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient showed that there was a positive correlation between maternal and paternal stress levels among Jordanian parents (Masa’Deh, et al., 2015). Several studies have examined factors such as marital choice and gender roles in marriage reflected an integrationist strategy combining the traditional cultural practices and identity priorities with the social preferences and economic realities of their new culture. Thus, social support was largely forthcoming from members of the Asian community, reflecting a degree of separation from the majority community particularly when emotional assistance was desired (Goodwin & Cramer, 2000). Urban married immigrant women had lower levels of acculturative stress and higher levels of support from spouse and more positive marital satisfaction compared to rural women. Factors influencing marital satisfaction in both groups were lower levels of acculturative and housewives’ life stress, higher levels of support from spouse, and living with parents-in-law (Nam & Ahn, 2011).

Table 5: Supporting statements, codes, and themes

S. No.	Supporting Statements	Codes	Themes
1	“The most stressful aspect of being a parent is taking responsibility for the right upbringing in terms of behavior and thoughts of the child.”	Thinking, stressing, worrying, going the right way, Time management, taking responsibility, handle everything on my own, ensuring he received a good education and learns to manage the pressure	Stressful aspect of becoming a parent
2	“Oh, when my daughter was small it was yoga, walks and friends, but right now she's grown up so not that much of stress as such.”	Yoga, walks, friends, put ourselves in her shoes, prioritize my own well-being, Talking to my daughter, spend time with the kids	Coping mechanisms
3	“Oh yes, I've received a lot of support from my parents' side and my in-laws' side and that was like proper guidance when I became parents for the first time. And then afterwards also, during any problem we had, we could turn to them.”	Family support and husband's support, proper guidance, Emotional support, same page supporting each other understanding, advice, checking up on kids, Interactions with colleagues, dealt with it together, open straightforward communication	Support from various sources
4	“My bringing up in an army family and also being an army officer, having experienced a cosmopolitan and modern background with strong social bonding & values has profoundly shaped my parenting experiences and expectations from my son by influencing beliefs about child-rearing practices, discipline, education, and family dynamics.”	Freedom to choose, own thinking, adjusting to the new place making new friends, new age thoughts and good old value systems to implement in upbringing, a safe place to return	Cultural background and values
5	“If it is regarding dealing with the child, then it is more that we discuss a plan, plan of action and how to go about the situation so that it is something we decide well in advance how to handle the situation. And know when a query comes up from her and then we are supporting each other. It's not that we counter each other. But the answer is usually common, when we are giving a solution to her.”	Discuss a plan, plan of action, no clash of conflict	Addressing and managing challenges
6	“By sharing the responsibilities of tracking down and guiding the child in different aspects of life. Example:- mom taking	Not force and try to control their thoughts, free to make their own choices, learn from their	Future prospects

care of the nutrition and eating habits of the child and dad taking care of All matter and thought process of the child and vice versa.”	experiences, tracking down and guiding the child, allow the children to do what interests them especially in studies and knowledge wise, in career wise
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Table 5 represents the supporting statements, codes, and themes.

1) Stressful aspect of becoming a parent

What has been the most stressful aspect of becoming a parent? This question was posed to the individuals resulting in a thorough investigation and understanding of the complex nature of parental stress.

The multifaceted nature of the *stressful aspects of being a parent* is one of the themes that have just been highlighted from the above question. Parenthood is a source of happiness as well as satisfaction but it also has its own set of problems that come with it. Parents exist in a complex terrain, full of uncertainties ranging from endless anxiety about making right choices and the need to perform variously. The challenges with parenting are not single faceted since they are influenced by many things. Parenthood carries stresses originating from financial factors, emotional strains, and societal expectations. In modern society, parents must keep acquiring new knowledge, checking actions, and upgrading their skills due to changing cultural contexts. Parenting stress is an amalgamation involving physical and mental aspects affecting parent-child relationships and child development outcomes. To mitigate stress among these parents, effective coping mechanisms are required besides support systems while social recognition should be given towards parental hardships for both mother and father to create conducive environments for children thereby reducing stress levels among them. Also society's expectation on parents compounds such anxieties fostering perfectionism within families where individuals begin comparing themselves with others. Parents often feel compelled to measure up to unrealistic standards, leading to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Effective support systems and coping mechanisms are essential in helping parents navigate these challenges. Whether through seeking guidance from trusted sources, prioritizing self-care, or fostering open communication with their partners and peers, parents can alleviate some of the burdens associated with parenthood. Additionally, society must recognize and validate the struggles of parenthood, offering resources and support networks to assist parents in their journey.

By fostering a culture of empathy and understanding, we can create a more nurturing environment for both parents and children alike (Richard, et.al., 2014).

2) Coping mechanism

The next question posed was: Are there any coping mechanisms/strategies you have found in managing stress? Based on their responses certain codes were identified and the theme was developed.

The theme of *coping mechanisms*, as reflected in the provided codes such as yoga, walks, spending time with friends, empathy ("put ourselves in her shoes"), self-care ("prioritize my own well-being"), communication ("talking to my daughter"), and family bonding ("spend time with the

kids"), underscores a multifaceted approach to managing stress and adversity. These codes represent a diverse array of strategies individuals employ to navigate challenges effectively. Yoga and walks symbolize physical activities that promote relaxation and mindfulness. Socializing with friends fosters a sense of connection and support, while empathy encourages understanding and perspective-taking. Prioritizing self-care underscores the importance of maintaining personal well-being amidst difficulties. Effective communication with loved ones, as evidenced by "talking to my daughter," enables emotional expression and mutual understanding. Lastly, spending time with family serves as a source of comfort and strength.

Overall, these coping mechanisms highlight the significance of holistic approaches in managing stressors and promoting resilience in the face of adversity (Viktoriia, et.al., 2023)

3) Support from various sources

With respect to support, the participants' were questioned, Did you receive any kind of support from family, friends or others?

The theme of *support* is evident throughout the research findings, as indicated by several key codes that emerged from the data analysis. Family support and husband's support were consistently cited as essential pillars in navigating various challenges. Participants highlighted the significance of proper guidance and emotionally supportive interactions within the family unit, emphasizing the importance of being on the same page and understanding each other's needs. This mutual support extended beyond the familial realm, with participants valuing advice, checking up on kids, and interactions with colleagues. Importantly, participants reported dealing with challenges together as a unit, relying on open, straightforward communication to foster understanding and resolve issues effectively.

Overall, these findings underscore the critical role of support networks in fostering resilience and well-being in both personal and professional domains (Faria, et.al., 2022)

4) Cultural background and values

Participants' were posed a question on How does cultural background and values shape your parenting experience? Based on their responses, various codes were developed and the main theme is examined in detail.

The theme of *cultural background and values* is central to understanding how individuals navigate their identities and relationships in a rapidly changing world. The codes provided—freedom to choose, own thinking, adjusting to the new place, making new friends, new age thoughts, and good old value systems to implement in upbringing, a safe place to return—highlight the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity, individual agency, and collective belonging. In the context of cultural background and values, individuals grapple with the tension between preserving ancestral customs and embracing contemporary ideologies. The

freedom to choose and own thinking signifies autonomy in shaping one's identity and worldview, while adjusting to new environments underscores the adaptability necessary for cultural integration. Making new friends reflects the universal desire for social connection across cultural boundaries, while new age thoughts and traditional values represent the dynamic exchange between innovation and heritage. Furthermore, the notion of a safe place to return speaks to the importance of cultural roots and a sense of belonging amidst change.

In research, exploring these codes within the context of cultural background and values offers insights into the complexities of identity formation and cultural adaptation in an increasingly globalized society (Elena, et.al., 2023).

5) Addressing and managing challenges

To understand how various challenges are taken care of, the question posed How do you and your spouse work together in addressing and managing the challenges that come with parenthood?

In *addressing and managing challenges*, it's essential to have a well-thought-out plan of action that ensures minimal conflict and maximum efficiency. This plan hinges on employing specific codes of conduct to guide interactions and decision-making processes. These codes emphasize open communication, mutual respect, and collaboration among team members. By fostering an environment of trust and understanding, conflicts can be pre-emptively mitigated or resolved amicably. Additionally, the plan should include clear protocols for identifying and addressing challenges as they arise, ensuring swift and effective responses.

Ultimately, by adhering to these codes and executing the plan diligently, teams can navigate obstacles smoothly and achieve their objectives with minimal disruption.

6. Future Prospects

One of the most common elements in responses was that all the measures taken by the parents will contribute to the near future of their children. Based on their responses, one of the themes identified was future prospects.

The theme of *future prospects* revolves around nurturing children in a manner that empowers them to make their own choices, learn from their experiences, and pursue their interests freely. This approach is encapsulated in the provided codes: "Not force and try to control their thoughts" emphasizes the importance of respecting children's autonomy and individuality. "Tracking down and guiding the child" acknowledges the role of caregivers in providing support and mentorship while allowing children to explore their interests. "Allow the children to do what interests them especially in studies and knowledge-wise, in career-wise" underscores the significance of fostering a learning environment where children are encouraged to pursue their passions and develop skills that align with their future aspirations.

By adhering to these principles, caregivers can help children cultivate a sense of agency and self-efficacy, laying a solid foundation for their future success and fulfillment.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to understand the relationship between the variables Perceived Social Support and Parental Stress as well as to understand the extent of social support perceived between married couples in the Indian context, using a mixed method approach. According to the findings obtained, a moderately negative correlation exists between perceived social support and parental stress. The study also revealed that a significant gender difference exists only in parental stress, with females reporting higher levels of stress than males. Additionally, the study showed no significant differences in the mean scores of couples with respect to parental stress, based on the number of children they have. The results of the qualitative study identified and highlighted some of the major themes such as stressful aspects of becoming a parent, support from various sources, addressing and managing challenges, with respect to social support received by the parents in managing stress. More in-depth and other qualitative factors and techniques could be studied with more variables, providing a detailed and intrinsic element to this study.

8. Future Scope

Future research should explore variables influencing Perceived Social Support and Parental Stress among married couples, such as, quality of life, marital satisfaction, and parenting styles. This comprehensive understanding can be crucial for interventions and support systems aimed at enhancing married couples' well-being, particularly in managing parental stress. Longitudinal studies can provide a more nuanced understanding of these relationships over time, especially for parents dealing with disabled children such as ADHD or ASD. Also, other qualitative methods can be used. Further research is needed to find out more contributing factors towards perceived social support and parental stress, and should be taken into consideration to explore other fields with equal male and female population. In the future, it is important to let children take control over their lives, especially regarding their careers so that they can fully develop and succeed in life.

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