

## Family Functioning and Self-Esteem of Middle School Students: A Matter of Perspective?

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### **Abstract:**

The relationship between family functioning and self-esteem of 619 middle school students was examined. Practical implications for counselors working with this population and their families are provided.

### **Article:**

"Who I am is what I think--not the other way around"--William Stringfellow

Constructs related to the self have been widely researched over the last several decades (Cuthbertson-Johnson, Franks, & Dornan, 1994; Gecas, 1982; Hamachek, 1992). Self-concept has been defined as the complete thoughts and feelings of a person in reference to self as an object (Rosenberg, 1979). Self-esteem, defined as a positive or negative attitude toward the self (Rosenberg, 1965), is one dimension of a person's self-concept (Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982). A high self-esteem indicates that one respects and considers him- or herself worthy; a low self-esteem implies self-rejection, self-dissatisfaction, and self-contempt (Rosenberg, 1965).

Beginning with the work of Coopersmith (1967), the relationship between family functioning and the self-esteem of children has been an important area of research. Researchers have established that student self-esteem is related to family factors including parental warmth and acceptance (Demo, Small, & Savin-Williams, 1987; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Steinberg, 1990), communication (Demo et al., 1987; Walker & Greene, 1986), perceived parental fairness (Larzelere, Klein, Schumm, & Alibrando, 1989), affective expression (Capaldi, Forgatch, & Crosby, 1994), cohesion and unity (Himes-Chapman & Hansen, 1983), parental use of coercion (Openshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1984), and psychological autonomy or control (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Buri, 1988; Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis, & Mueller, 1988; Ellerman, 1993; Lord, Eccles, & McCarthy, 1994; Scott, Scott, & McCabe, 1991). Scott et al. (1991) found a general uniformity across cultures in the magnitude of the correlation between self-esteem and family functioning. Greenberg, Siegel, and Leitch (1983) found that quality of attachment to parents was a significantly more powerful predictor of self-esteem among students than was quality of attachment to peers.

The gender of the student also has proven important in the relationship between family functioning and self-esteem, although results are mixed. Some researchers (Demo et al., 1987; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Holmbeck & Hill, 1986) have found the self-esteem of boys to be more strongly related to family relationships than is the self-esteem of girls. Buri et al. (1988), however, examined the relationship between self-esteem and parental characteristics of authoritarianism and authoritativeness and found that more than twice the variance in self-esteem could be predicted for female students (37%) than for male students (16%), suggesting that the self-esteem of female students may be more dependent on family relationships than is the self-esteem of male students. Others (Openshaw et al., 1984; Walker & Greene, 1986) also have found parental influences on self-esteem to be stronger for female students than for male students.

One previous study (Kawash & Kozeluk, 1990) examined self-esteem in early adolescence as a function of family position within the Circumplex Model of Family Systems. The Circumplex Model represents the

functioning of the family system on the dimensions of cohesion (emotional bonding) and adaptability (ability of a family system to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational stress) (Olson et al., 1992). Kawash and Kozeluk (1990) found family cohesion to be a strong predictor of self-esteem during early adolescence. Alternatively, family adaptability did not provide significant predictive information. Kawash and Kozeluk did not examine students' satisfaction with family cohesion and adaptation.

Frequently, studies on student self-esteem have used data collected from teachers, parents or guardians, or others. Sagatun (1991) stressed a need for studies on the perceptions of different groups, including minors themselves. It is important to examine systematically the subjective experiences of middle school students selves to further knowledge about their concerns. Also, research on student issues often has used clinical samples. As Zaslow and Takanishi (1993) asserted, research with representative rather than clinical samples is needed.

The purpose of this study, then, was to examine how family cohesion, family adaptability, and student satisfaction with cohesion and adaptability are related to student self-esteem by testing a path model among a nonclinical sample of middle school students (sixth through eighth grade). It is believed that inclusion of the satisfaction measure adds to the existing empirical understanding of the relationship between family functioning and student self-esteem. Such information is of clear importance to counselors who are concerned with the self-esteem and emotional development of students. Middle school marks an important developmental transition into the adolescent years. The model for this study posited that the three domains of family functioning (cohesion, adaptability, and satisfaction) directly influence student self-esteem.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

Participants were 619 students in Grades 6, 7, and 8, obtained from the 29 classrooms of Reidsville Middle School in Reidsville, North Carolina. This population consisted of 301 (48.6%) female students and 318 (51.4%) male students. Racially, the participants included 241 (38.9%) African American students, 301 (48.6%) White students, 4 (.6%) Native American students, 25 (4%) "Other" (most indicated that they were biracial), 6 (1%) "Unknown," and 42 (6.8%) did not specify.

The students also were asked to provide information about their living arrangements. In the sample, 296 (47.8%) participants indicated that they lived with both parents, 61 (9.9%) with their mother and stepfather, 14 (2.3%) with their father and stepmother, 135 (21.8%) with mother only, 18 (2.9%) with father only, 38 (6.1%) with other relatives, 3 (.5%) in foster care, 8 (1.3%) "Other" living arrangements, and 46 (7.4%) did not specify.

### ***Instruments***

Measures of family cohesion, family adaptability, family satisfaction, and self-esteem were used. The data were gathered through self-reports. Each instrument's reading level, which was calculated using Fry's Readability Graph (Fry, 1977), ranged between third and sixth grade.

Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale (FACES II). FACES II (Olson et al., 1992) is a 30-item Likert format instrument measuring the dimensions of family cohesion and family adaptability. Concurrent validity of FACES II has been established through correlations with other family instruments to be .93 (cohesion) and .79 (adaptability). Cronbach's alphas have been measured at .87 (cohesion), .78 (adaptability), and .90 (total scale) (Olson et al., 1992).

Family Satisfaction Scale (FSS). The FSS (Olson et al., 1992) is a 14-item instrument to assess satisfaction with current levels of family cohesion and adaptability. Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .92. The 5-week, test-retest correlation for the total score was .75 (Olson et al., 1992).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). The RSE is a 10-item Guttman scale with a Likert-style format. Responses range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). The scale has a Coefficient of Reproducibility of 92%

and a Coefficient of Scalability of 72% (Rosenberg, 1979). Confirmatory analyses provide support for the validity of the RSE as a measure of experienced self-esteem (Demo, 1985).

### ***Procedure***

Consent forms were distributed to students to take home to their parents, who were given the option of refusing participation in the study. Students completed the instruments in class under the direction of their teachers, who had been briefed in a faculty meeting regarding administration procedures. Student identification numbers were used to ensure anonymity of responses.

### ***Data Analysis***

Several procedures were used to analyze the data. First, descriptive statistics (e.g., means and standard deviations) were calculated for each variable in this study. T-tests were calculated to test for differences on each of the study variables by gender. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the variability between respondents by grade for Grades 6, 7, and 8. A path analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the study variables. Finally, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted to examine the relative predictive power of the various family variables on student self-esteem. All tests were conducted at the .05 level.

## **RESULTS**

The means and standard deviations for each of the study variables are reported in Table 1, as well as t values to examine differences by gender. No significant differences were found between male and female students. An ANOVA was used to test the variability between respondents by grade for Grades 6, 7, and 8. Results are reported in Table 2. There were two significant results. Effects for grade level were obtained for family cohesion ( $F = 3.54$ ,  $df = 585$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and family satisfaction ( $F = 5.13$ ,  $df = 591$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Scheffe's procedure was used to conduct post hoc comparisons. Eighth-grade students reported a significantly lower level of family cohesion and family satisfaction than did sixth-grade students.

All of the study variables were intercorrelated at a significant level ( $p < .05$ ). The zero-order correlation matrix for the variables is presented in Table 3.

### ***Examination of the Model***

The path analysis for the total sample is presented in Figure 1. Beta values are reported on the paths and the  $R^2$  value for the outcome variable (self-esteem) is reported above that variable. When all of the predictors in the model were used to predict self-esteem, results were significant ( $R^2 = .23$ ,  $F = 59.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The variables in the model accounted for 23% of the variance in self-esteem.

In addition to the path analysis, a series of stepwise regressions were conducted to further examine the relative strength of the predictors in the model. A criterion level of .05 was established for inclusion in the model. Stepwise analyses indicated that, within the specified model, family satisfaction was the strongest predictor of student self-esteem ( $R^2 = .22$ ,  $F = 166.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ). With family satisfaction already in the prediction equation, family adaptability loaded as the second strongest predictor ( $R^2 = .23$ ,  $R^2 = \text{change} = .01$ ,  $F = 88.36$ ,  $p < .05$ ). With family satisfaction and family adaptability in the equation, family cohesion failed to provide significant additional information at the .05 level.

### ***Gender Differences in the Model***

In addition to testing the model for the total sample, the model also was tested separately for male and female participants to examine gender differences in the model. The model provided only slightly more predictive information for female participants ( $R^2 = .24$ ) than for male participants ( $R^2 = .22$ ). The relative magnitude of the beta weights for the predictor variables was highly similar for male and for female participants.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Developmental Patterns***

Some developmental patterns emerged in this study. Eighth-grade students reported a significantly lower level of family cohesion and family satisfaction than did sixth-grade students. These results suggest that students become less involved and less satisfied with family relations as they move through the middle school years. The strong correlation between family cohesion and family satisfaction (.70) suggests that the two are related, although causation cannot be inferred.

### ***The Model***

The model specified in this study accounted for a moderate portion of the variance in the self-esteem (23%) of the participating middle school students. More important, however, was the relative influence of the predictors within the model. Family satisfaction, that is, the students' perceptions of satisfaction with cohesion and adaptability levels in their family, was a much stronger predictor of student self-esteem than was either family cohesion or family adaptability. Generally, these results were consistent both for male and for female students.

Also, in this study, students' perceptions of family adaptability were a significant predictor of student self-esteem, whereas family cohesion was not. This is in contrast to the work of Kawash and Kozeluk (1990), who found family cohesion, but not family adaptability, to be a significant predictor of student self-esteem. Kawash and Kozeluk studied these relationships for older students (adolescents) and used different instrumentation (e.g., FACES HI). Additional research is needed to examine the nature of the relationships between various components of family functioning and student self-esteem for students at different developmental levels.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS AND OTHER SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Results of this study must be considered in the context of limitations of the study. Although previous researchers have called for studies that examine students' perspectives (cf. Zaslow & Takanishi, 1993), the fact that all results are based on the self-report of the students themselves remains a limitation. Further work is needed to examine the relationship between family functioning and self-esteem using other data collection methods (e.g., family interviews, independent ratings of students' self-esteem).

This study suggests that, among middle school students, self-reported satisfaction with family cohesion and adaptability provides more predictive information about self-esteem than the students' perceptions of cohesion and adaptability in and of itself. Combatting the problem of poor self-esteem among middle school students is a complex process that requires assessment and intervention at many levels. Recommended actions for counselors and other service providers include the following:

1. Assess formally (i.e., FSS) or informally (student interview) the student's subjective perception of her or his family.
2. Inasmuch as family satisfaction influences the self-esteem of middle school students, positively reframe family issues of consequence to the adolescent to influence her or his perception; it is important, however, to respect the perceptions of the adolescent.
3. Develop conceptualization skills to determine the preferred type of intervention (i.e., family, individual, or group) to influence self-esteem.
4. When working with families, assess discrepancies between student and parent reports of family functioning; such discrepancies provide important information for interventions.
5. When working with students who have self-esteem problems, assess to what extent acting-out behaviors with authority figures (e.g., teacher, counselor, principal) may be a function of transference of family dissatisfaction.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study provides support for a relationship between family functioning and the self-esteem of middle school students. Of particular importance was the strength of the family satisfaction variable as a predictor of self-esteem. Counselors need to keep in mind the importance of this subjective perception of middle school students

in assessing family functioning and its impact on other facets of the student's life. It seems that middle school students do have a serious need for a positive relationship with their parents, and this need seems to be slightly stronger for girls than for boys. The Association for Humanistic Education and Development (AHEAD) believes in the right of each individual to function as an autonomous human being. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that counselors working with middle school students consider their own biases about "optimal" family functioning until they fully understand the dynamics of the family from the student's perspective. Considering the level of student satisfaction with family functioning is central to this assessment process.

**TABLE 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and t Values of Study Variables by Male and Female Groups**

Legend for Chart:

- A - Variable
- B - Participants, All (n = 619), M
- C - Participants, All (n = 619), SD
- D - Participants, Girls (n = 301), M
- E - Participants, Girls (n = 301), SD
- F - Participants, Boys (n = 318), M
- G - Participants, Boys (n = 318), SD
- H - t-Value

A	B	C	D	E
F	G	H		
Family cohesion	56.40	10.20	56.27	9.80
56.49	10.61	-.27		
Family adaptability	44.25	7.93	44.30	7.88
44.18	7.97	.19		
Family satisfaction	47.99	10.63	47.84	48.14
48.14	10.59	-.35		
Self-esteem	31.77	5.98	31.65	31.88
31.88	5.88	-.48		

Note. No significant differences found between female and male participants.

**TABLE 2  
Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analysis of Variance of Study Variables**

Legend for Chart:

- A - Variable

B - Grade 6 (n = 219), M  
 C - Grade 6 (n = 219), SD  
 D - Grade 7 (n = 201), M  
 E - Grade 7 (n = 201), SD  
 F - Grade 8 (n = 176), M  
 G - Grade 8 (n = 176), SD  
 H - F

A	B	C	D	E
F	G	H		
Family cohesion	57.54	10.25	57.80	9.82
54.85	10.31	3.54[a]		
Family adaptability	43.90	8.12	45.04	7.55
43.83	7.63	1.51		
Family satisfaction	49.28	10.80	48.30	10.33
45.92	10.35	5.13[a]		
Self-esteem	31.98	6.27	31.70	5.34
31.49	6.22	0.33		

a Omnibus F test is significant,  $p < .05$ .

**TABLE 3**  
**Correlation Matrix of Variables Affecting Self-Esteem**

Legend for Chart:

A - Variable  
 B - Family Cohesion  
 C - Family Adaptability  
 D - Family Satisfaction  
 E - Self-Esteem

A	B	C	D	E
Family cohesion	--	--	--	--
Family adaptability	.65[a]	--	--	--
Family satisfaction	.70[a]	.66[a]	--	--



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