

Growth and Happiness of Bedouin Mothers of Adolescents with Disabilities

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Abstract

Objectives: The uniqueness and importance of the research being presented in this report is threefold: 1) This is the first study to examine growth and happiness among mothers of adolescents with disabilities in the Bedouin community in Israel, a minority group that is usually not researched. 2) The study emphasizes the positive aspects of coping, a topic that has been scarcely studied in the literature. 3) The study compares three groups of different disabilities: autism, intellectual disability, and deafness.

Method: Participants were 192 Bedouin mothers of adolescents, aged 12 - 21, with disabilities. Five research tools were employed: Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, Handicap Related Events Checklist Symptom Severity Measure, Perceived Stress Scale, Subjective Happiness, and a demographic questionnaire.

Results: Significant differences were found for the specific stress level related to each disability, with the highest level of stress found among mothers of adolescents with intellectual disability. A significant correlation was found between the two measures of general and specific stress. Other interesting results include the non-linear relation between stress and growth and the relation between growth and happiness.

Conclusions: Bedouin mothers of adolescents with disability reveal important information regarding stress growth and happiness.

Keywords: *Growth; Happiness; Bedouin Mothers; Adolescents; Disabilities*

Introduction

This research presents the findings from an initial study on growth, happiness, and stress among mothers of adolescents in three groups of disabilities: autism, intellectual disability, and deafness. Such a comparative examination is rarely found in the literature. The study is also the first to examine this subject among mothers of adolescents with disabilities in the Bedouin community in Israel (see Manor-Binyamini, 2011, for a review of the special characteristics of mothers of children with disabilities in this community) [1].

In addition, the uniqueness of the current study lies in its examination of the positive coping skills among mothers of adolescents with disabilities. Due to clinical psychology's historic emphasis on pathology, research on the coping skills of mothers raising a child/adolescent with a disability usually focuses on the negative implications, as expressed in feelings of loss, depression, tension, pain, sadness, and lack of functioning, on the part of members of the nuclear family, such as parents and siblings [2,3]. The conception guiding the current study is that understanding the positive implications of stress may further illuminate the coping process.

This study had two primary objectives: The first was to investigate the differences between the mothers in the three research groups in terms of growth, happiness, and stress regarding the disability of their child. The comparison between the groups was conducted through

one-way MANOVA analyses and Scheffe's paired comparison analysis. The second aim was to examine if any relationships exist between the three components of growth, happiness, and stress. For this purpose, Pearson coefficients were calculated for all the respondents and for each group separately, and analyses of Fischer's Z were also conducted to examine the differences in the correlations between the groups.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 192 Bedouin mothers of adolescents, aged 12 - 21, with disabilities. There were three groups of 64 mothers in each, chosen in accordance with the three most common disabilities in the Bedouin community of the Negev: autism – a communication disorder; mental retardation – an intellectual disability; and deafness – a sensory disorder. All of the adolescents were enrolled in special education schools in the Bedouin community.

Instruments

Post-traumatic Growth Inventory [4]

This is a 23-item self-report questionnaire. For each statement, the respondents are asked to rate the extent to which a change in their lives occurred due to a particular stressful event. Responses are rated on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from (0) "I did not experience this change due to the crisis" to (5) "I experienced this change to a very large extent due to the crisis." An average is calculated for each respondent. The internal reliability of the instrument, as measured by Tedeschi and Calhoun [4], was found to be $\alpha = 0.90$. In a reliability test-retest, a correlation of $r = 0.71$ was found [4]. In the current study, internal consistency was found to be $\alpha = 0.93$.

Handicap Related Events Checklist Symptom Severity Measure [5]

This is a self-report questionnaire for parents of disabled children, and its purpose is to examine the level of stress related to the child's disability. The questionnaire includes 15 items related to special physical, financial, or social difficulties that may arise directly from the child's disability, such as leisure activity options and special treatments for the child. Responses are rated on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from (0) "no difficulty" in the specific area to (5) "the most difficulty." The grade is calculated by the sum total of the items. The power of the specific stressor is calculated by totaling the grades of each mother, with the grades ranging from 0 – 80. In the current study, the internal consistency was found to be $\alpha = 0.88$.

Perceived Stress Scale [6]

This is a 13-item self-report questionnaire aimed to assess the general level of stress in an individual's life. Six items refer to the general feelings of stress and distress experienced by the respondents in their daily lives during the past year. Seven additional items examine the extent to which the respondents are managing to deal with these feelings. Responses are rated on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) never to (4) often. The overall grade is based on the average of all the items. In the current study, the internal consistency was found to be $\alpha = 0.88$.

Subjective Happiness [7]

This questionnaire examines the individual's level of general subjective happiness. Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they feel happy relative to others on a seven-point Likert scale. The overall grade is based on the average of all the items. The average grade in Lyubomirsky and Lepper's study (1990) was found to be 4.8. In the current study, the internal consistency was found to be $\alpha = 0.80$.

Demographic questionnaire

The questionnaire included personal details about the mother and the adolescent child. The details pertaining to the mother were: age, years of education, extent of work hours, religiosity, native country, economic situation, and health situation. Details pertaining to

the adolescent were: age, gender, number of siblings at home, place in the birth order (i.e., whether or not first-born), diagnosis, and functional description of the disability.

Results

Significant differences in demographic background

Regarding the mothers, no significant differences were found in relation to age, education, religiosity, work hours, economic or health situation. Regarding the children, no significant differences were found in relation to number of siblings at home or birth order. Significant differences were found in relation to gender of the adolescents, with 90% of the adolescents in the autism group being male, as opposed to a more equal male: female ratio in the intellectual disability and deafness groups.

The averages of the various groups were calculated for the continuous variables of mothers’ and adolescents’ age, and a uni-directional analysis of variance was conducted to examine the differences between the groups. A significant difference was found between the intellectual disability group and the other groups. No significant differences were found in regard to mothers’ age. The averages, standard deviations, and results of the variance analysis for each of the characteristics are presented in table 1.

Characteristics		Intellectual disability	Autism	Deafness	F(3,174)
Age of mother	M	36.76	35.80	35.28	637.
	SD	5.36	4.76	5.00	
Age of child	M	4.71	4.74	4.74	1.03
	SD	1.26	1.37	1.47	

Table 1: Averages and standard deviations of continuous personal characteristics by study group.

Differences between the study groups

The first research question referred to the differences between the mothers according to the disability of their child. Differences were examined in relation to maternal stress, type of child’s disability, mother’s personal growth and feeling of happiness. Regarding general and specific feelings of stress, a significant difference was found between the various disabilities ($\eta^2 = 0.19$ $F(6,357) = 12.93$, $p > 0.01$). The averages, standard deviations, and results of the analyses of variance are presented in table 2.

Characteristics		Intellectual disability	Autism	Deafness	F(1,185)	η^2
Specific stress	M	2.59	1.75	0.91	25.82 ***	0.30
	SD	1.10	1.13	0.65		
General stress	M	2.46	2.20	2.34	1.32	0.02
	SD	0.45	0.38	0.44		

Table 2: Averages and standard deviations of general and specific stress among mothers according to the type of disability.

As seen in the table, in the variance analyses conducted separately for each measure, significant differences were found between the different disabilities only with regard to specific stress, meaning the stress related to difficulties caused by the disability itself.

The averages show that the mothers of children with intellectual disabilities rated their difficulties higher than the other groups, followed by the mothers of autistic children. The mothers of deaf adolescents rated their difficulties at the lowest level relative to the other

groups. Accordingly, in Scheffe's paired comparison analysis, significant differences were found between the mothers of deaf adolescents and the other groups, as well as between the mothers of autistic adolescents and the mothers of adolescents with intellectual disabilities.

The study also examined two measures of feelings – growth and happiness – among the mothers. In the MANOVA analyses comparing the groups on these measures, no significant differences were found between the mothers $F(6,361) = 1.62, p > 0.05$. Generally speaking, it seems that the feeling of personal growth was rated as low on a five-point scale ($M = 1.81, SD = 0.62$). On the other hand, the feeling of happiness was rated as medium on a seven-point scale ($M = 3.22, SD = 0.91$).

Relations between the research variables

The second objective of the study focused on examination of the relationships between stress, happiness, and growth, with the expectation that the higher the level of stress, the lower the level of growth and happiness. The correlation between stress, happiness, and growth are presented in table 3.

Measures	Specific stress	General stress	Growth	Happiness
Specific stress	1			
General stress	0.37***	1		
Growth	-0.03	-0.27***	1	
Happiness	-0.24***	-0.50***	0.33***	1

Table 3: Pearson correlations between stress, happiness, and growth ($n = 192$).

As expected, a significant, positive correlation was found between the two measures of stress, such that the more difficulty in dealing with the disabled adolescent, the higher the mother's level of general stress. General stress was also found to be negatively related to feelings of growth and happiness, such that the higher the level of stress, the lower the feelings of happiness and growth.

Regarding stress, the possibility of a non-linear component in the relationship between general stress and growth was also examined. Indeed, a non-linear significant relationship was found between general stress and growth ($r = 0.20, p < 0.001$). The relationship between the linear and non-linear components of stress and growth was found to be $r = 0.34, p < 0.001$. The relationship between stress and growth was characterized by higher levels of stress being related to more growth. However, beyond a medium level, a different relationship appears, that is, the higher the level of stress, the lower the level of growth.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences in coping among Bedouin mothers of adolescents with various disabilities. The study was unique insofar as it examined general and specific stress related to the disability separately. The results show that there are differences between the groups in terms of the specific stress caused by the child's disability, with the mothers of children with intellectual disabilities experiencing higher levels of stress than the mothers with autistic or deaf children. The mothers of deaf children experienced the lowest level of specific stress relative to the other two groups. These results stand in contrast to other findings claiming that mothers of autistic children experience great stress [8].

These results may be explained by the relationship between the difficulties experienced by parents and the intensiveness of care required for this population of children with intellectual disabilities [9]. It is also possible that the mothers of adolescents with prominent visual characteristics in the group with intellectual disabilities may feel a higher level of stress as compared to other groups due to the difficulty of daily encounters with society.

Although differences were found between the groups in terms of the specific stress related to the adolescent's disability, no differences were found in the way that general stress, happiness, and growth were expressed among the mothers of adolescents with various disabilities. This finding highlights the uniqueness of the current study, which examined the two types of stress separately.

An interesting result emerged from this study in regard to the relationship between stress and growth. Apparently, there is a non-linear relationship between stress and growth so that when stress is at a low to intermediate level, more growth is associated with a higher level of stress. However, beyond an intermediate level of stress, a different relationship was revealed, that is, the higher the level of stress, the lower the level of growth. In addition to the negative relationship between general stress and growth, another negative relationship was also found between the specific stress of mothers and their feelings of happiness. Thus, the higher the level of maternal stress related to raising an adolescent with a disability, the lower the level of happiness. Another interesting finding was that of the unique relationship between growth and happiness, which seem to represent two different subjective feelings, despite being interrelated and sharing a common denominator.

The study has two primary limitations. First, the data were collected from the mothers of adolescents. In order to follow the changes and developments in growth and happiness among mothers of children with disabilities, future studies need to be conducted on groups of mothers of young children, adolescents, and adults. Second, data collection was based on self-reports. Further examination of the points of view of experts and/or additional members of the family or the community regarding this issue is recommended.

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