

A study of the relationships between family functioning and psychological hardiness among parents with exceptional children and normal children

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Objective: The objective behind this study was investigating the relationships between family functioning and psychological hardiness in parents of exceptional children versus parents of normal children.

Methodology: The study was causal-comparative. Population included all parents of normal and exceptional students in Bojnurd City studying in ordinary and exceptional schools in the academic year 2010-2011. Participants were 190 parents: 50 parents with exceptional children and 140 with normal children. Multistage cluster sampling was used to select the sample. Family functioning questionnaire and psychological hardiness questionnaire were used for data collection. Data were analyzed using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, independent t-test, Mann-Whitney U test, and Spearman correlation.

Findings: Findings suggested there was significant statistical relationship between family functioning and psychological hardiness in parents of exceptional and normal children ($p < 0.0001$), and family functioning was significantly higher in parents of exceptional children compared to parents of normal children ($p < 0.0001$). In addition, psychological hardiness was significantly higher in normal children parents compared to exceptional children parents ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: results indicate significant relationship between family functioning and psychological hardiness in parents of normal and exceptional children.

Key words: Hardiness, family function, exceptional children

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Introduction

Hardiness is a pattern of attitudes and skills that provides the courage and strategies to turn stressful circumstances from potential disasters into growth opportunities instead (1). Kobasa considers hardiness as a personality trait which acts as a source of resistance and a protective shield in the face of life's stressful events. Using existentialist theories in personality, he defines hardiness as combination of beliefs about oneself and the world which is composed of three components: commitment, control, and challenge. Commitment is the feeling of incorporating into many aspects of the life such as family, occupation and interpersonal relationships. One who possesses such feeling has found meaning and purposefulness in life, work, and family. Control is a belief that implies life events and their consequences are predictable and controllable and

they can be changed. Challenge implies the belief that change is an ordinary aspect of the life and that, events which entail one's re-adaptation to the new situation, whether positive or negative, are regarded as opportunities for growth and learning rather than as threats to one's safety and comfort (2).

Among the many factors that influence on the shaping and development of personality traits, the role of family has long been considered. Experts agree familial factors are important factors in the development and enhancement of personality traits. Maddi and Khoshaba theoretically define hardiness as a phenomenon which is shaped under influence of rich, varied and rewarding experiences of childhood. They stated that family criteria are important in hardiness formation (2).

Many theorists, including Freud, Adler and Salivan believe that the personality is developed in

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childhood when the deepest family bonds are shaped. Family functioning is in consistency with changes developed over the life, conflicts solving, members' correlation and success in disciplinary patterns, observing limits between people and conducting regulations and rules and principles governing this entity aiming at protecting the whole system. Studies suggest that all members are relatively resistant and immune against life pressures in families in which members' relationships and interactions are based on intimacy and understanding (3).

argue that hardiness features including remarkable curiosity, the tendency to experience interesting and meaningful things, being energetic and considering change in life as a normal thing can be useful in adaptation to stressful events of the life(4). Studies indicate that there is positive significant relationship between hardiness and psychological health and it can decrease negative impacts of stress as an internal resistance source and prevent from physical and mental disorders (5).

However, determining the circumstances under which such an important personality characteristic is developed is of particular interest. Among the many factors that influence on shaping the evolution of personality traits, the role of family has long been considered. Family influence on the development and evolution of personality traits is important and experts agree on this fact. The family will never lose its importance regarding shaping the personality since change in family leads to change in inner psychological process of its members (2).

Also(6) stated that probably childhood experiences as well as positive interaction with parents and family may lead to formation of a tolerant personality. In addition, Estivard et al. suggest that the environment including the family should be structured and predictable in such a way that their efforts lead to success and they can have right to make choices in order to develop hardiness in children.

Studies indicate that all family members are relatively resistant and immune against life pressures in families in which members' relationships and interactions are based on intimacy and understanding. Family functioning is related to mental health of family members and there is a significant relationship between poor family functioning and physical symptoms, anxiety, sleep disorder, depression and impairment in social functioning (3).

Various studies have demonstrated that some family characteristics play an important role in making people resistant against life pressures. Intimate relationship, emotional support, solidarity and structured family are among such features. Since the main characteristic in hardy people is higher resistance in coping with life pressures, a relationship between these family characteristics and hardiness is expected (2). One of the issues which can influence on the family is having disabled child. Children with physical, mental or behavioral disability provide unique and different challenges for the family (7).

Generally families with mentally-disabled children face far more challenges for parenting, nurturing and educating the child and than is normally the case. These issues all put pressure on the parents which disturbs the peace of mind and integrity of the family and consequently influence on their adaptation and adjustment. Continuous care of mentally retarded children is often stressful for parents because difficulties with these children inevitably affect on their life. Studies show that parents of mentally- retarded children are usually susceptible to family life problems and emotional difficulties (7).

Therefore, this study attempts to study whether there is any significant relationship between family functioning and psychological hardiness in normal children and exceptional children parents.

Methodology

This study was causal – comparative. It included two populations: all parents of exceptional children studying in elementary school for exceptional children in the academic year 2010-2011, and all parents of normal children studying in elementary schools for normal children in the academic year 2010-2011. Participants were 190 parents: 140 with normal children and 50 with exceptional children. As we had no access to the list of parents of normal children, multistage cluster sampling was used to select the sample. First, two districts were selected from municipality districts of the Bojnurd City and one elementary school was selected in each district randomly. In each school, three classes were selected randomly. Parents of the students in these classes filled the questionnaires. Similarly, due to the lack of population list for exceptional children parents, two districts were specified and one school in each district and one class in each school were selected randomly.

In order to collect data two questionnaires were used:

1. Family assessment device (FAD)
2. Personal views survey (Hardiness)

Family assessment is a questionnaire composed of 60 items which was defined for assessing family functioning by Epstein et al. (1983) based on McMaster pattern(8). This pattern determines structural, occupational and interactional characteristics of the family and specifies six dimensions of the family functioning including: problem solving, communication, roles, affective involvement and/or responsiveness, and Control of behavior. Thus, "family assessment device" according to these six aspects is composed of six subscales for assessing them and one seventh subscale related to general family functioning (9).

"Family assessment" with alpha coefficient of 0.72-0.92 in its sub-scales has relatively acceptable internal consistency (9). In a study on single and married college students in age range of 20-30 in Khomeini-Shahr City, alpha coefficient for the total scale and subscales of problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control and general functioning were reported as 0.90, 0.63, 0.48, 0.56, 0.75, 0.74, 0.0, and 0.91, respectively. Also (9) in his study on 180 female students in high school level in Tehran City reported alpha coefficient of the total scale and subscales of problem solving, communication, roles, affective involvement and/or responsiveness, and Control of behavior and general functioning as 0.92, 0.38, 0.72, 0.64, 0.65, 0.0, 0.62 and 0.81, respectively.

Personal Views Survey is a questionnaire which is used in assessment of hardiness and is composed of 50 items; subjects are asked to specify their degree of agreement with the statements on a 4-degree scale. Zero indicates that those statements are not correct at all and 3 shows that the statement is perfectly true as viewed by the subject. This test includes three scales: challenge, commitment and control, each of which accounts for 17, 16 and 17 items in the test. Separate score is considered for each of scales of challenge, commitment and control, and non-weighted average of the three scale scores will be considered as the total score of hardiness.

(10) believes this 50- items questionnaire represents the third generation of tests used to measure hardiness. Three components of this test have

acceptable reliability and internal consistency and factor analysis has shown that these three factors are related to each other. This test is correlated to initial forms of hardiness argue that this test is currently the best way of assessing hardiness.

The following factor analysis of this scale, investigated these three factors and reported acceptable reliability and validity for hardiness scale. Studies indicate that hardiness components, that is, commitment, control and challenge have reliability coefficients of 0.70, 0.52 and 0.52, respectively; reliability coefficients reported for the hardiness attribute, as a whole, was 0.75 (10).

Maddi (11) examined relationship between this questionnaire and pathological subscales of Minnesota multiphasic personality inventory in order to investigate validity of the questionnaire. Correlation coefficient between hardiness score and pathological subscales of Minnesota inventory was found as 0.11- 0.53. Items of hardiness test are very abstract, thus its translation is complicated. In order to translate it into Persian and assure its validity in Iran, three psychiatrists, two psychologists and four psychology seniors approved this questionnaire as a useful device for assessing hardiness. Test reliability was calculated based on Cronbach's alpha coefficient. It was 0.81 for total score of the test, and reliability coefficient for components of commitment, control and challenge was found as 0.73, 0.68 and 0.71, respectively.

Collected data were presented in two parts: descriptive and inferential statistics. Tables and diagrams (including statistical indices such as frequency, average, standard deviation, and percentage) were used for data description and statistical tests including Kolmogorov – Smirnov test (for investigating normality of data distribution), independent t-test and Mann-Whitney U test (for comparing average of two independent groups), and Spearman correlation (for examining two variables) were used in order to inference data.

Results

As it can be seen from table 1, among 190 subjects of the research, 140 were normal children parents and 50 were exceptional children parents. In addition, out of 92 male subjects, 69 ones were parents of normal children and 23 ones were parents of exceptional children. Among 98 female subjects, 71 ones were parents of normal children and 27 ones were parents of exceptional children.

Table 1. Distribution of subjects' gender in terms of study groups

group	male		Female		total	
	frequency	percent	frequency	percent	frequency	percent
normal	69	75	71	72/4	140	73/7
exceptional	23	25	27	27/6	50	27/6
total	92	100	98	100	190	100

Regarding table 2, among 50 exceptional cases, 42 ones (84%) had congenital defects and 8 ones (16%) had been affected by defect after birth.

Table 2. Frequency distribution for the time of affliction in exceptional children

time of affliction	frequency	percent
congenital	42	84
Post birth	8	16
total	50	100

According to table 3, out of 50 cases of exceptional children, 16 ones (32%) were mentally retarded, 5 ones (10%) had visual impairments, 20 ones (40%) had physical and motor retardation and 9 ones (18%) suffered from hearing loss.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of defect type in exceptional children

Type of disability	mental	visual	physical	audio	total
frequency	16	5	20	9	50
percent	32	10	40	9	100

Regarding table 4, out of 140 parents of normal children, 14 ones had degrees under high school, 59 ones had high school diploma, 15 ones had associate degree, 43 ones had BA degree, and 9 ones had MA degree. In addition, among 50 parents of exceptional children, 1 was illiterate, 25 ones had degrees under high school, 11 ones had associate degree, and 2 ones had BA degree. Overall, one cases was illiterate (5%), 39 (20.5%) had degrees under high school, 70 (36.8%) had high school diploma, 26 (13.7%) had associate degree, 45 (23.7%) had BA degree and 9 (4.7%) had BA degree.

Table 4. Distribution of educational level of subjects in terms of study groups

Educational level	normal		exceptional		total	
	frequency	percent	frequency	percent	frequency	percent
illiterate	0	0	1	2	1	5
under high school	14	10	25	50	39	20/5
diploma	59	42/1	11	22	70	36/8
associate degree	15	10/4	11	22	26	13/7
BA degree	43	30/7	2	4	45	23/7
MA degree	9	6/4	0	0	9	4/7
total	140	100	50	1	190	100

According to table 5, age average in the sample of normal children parents was 37.24 and its standard deviation was 4.96. Age average in the sample of exceptional children parents was 37.30 and its standard deviation was 6.46.

Table 5. mean and Standard deviation for age by groups

variable	group	Mean score	Standard deviation
age	normal	37/24	4/96
	exceptional	37/30	6/46

As it can be seen from table 6, regarding probability values in Kolmogrov – Smirnov test, distribution of family functioning variable is normal in normal and exceptional children groups ($P < 0.2$ and $P < 0.10$), and distribution of psychological hardiness is normal in exceptional children parents group ($P < 0.20$) and

it is abnormal in normal children parents group ($P > 0.03$).

Table 6. Mean, standard deviation and normality test for hardiness and family function among groups

variable	group	Mean score	Standard deviation	Z, k.s	P value
hardiness	normal	112/22	15/38	0/068	0/03
	exceptional	117/78	15/65	0/073	0/20
Family function	normal	149/07	10/22	0/078	0/20
	exceptional	142/34	12/39	0/114	0/10

The relationship between variables of family functioning and psychological hardiness was examined using Spearman correlation test. Results suggest that there is significance relationship in this regard ($p < 0.0001$ and $r = 0.39$).

Table 7. Relationship between family functioning and psychological hardiness in both groups

Family function	hardiness	
	r	P value
	-0/39	0/0001

Results given in table 8 indicate that there is statistical difference in terms of family functioning in groups of exceptional and normal children parents ($p < 0.0001$). Average of family functioning in normal group is 149.07, while it is 142.34 in exceptional families group. Regarding these indices, it is clear that average of family functioning is significantly higher in normal children parents compared to exceptional children parents, and concerning the fact that lower scores on family functioning indicates better functioning, thus family functioning is significantly better in exceptional children parents group compared to normal children parents group.

Table 8. Comparison of family functioning and hardiness in both groups

variable	group	Mean score	t	P value
Family function	normal	149/07	3/77	0/0001
	exceptional	142/34		
hardiness	normal	103/63	-3/41	0/001
	exceptional	72/74		

Results of table 8 indicate that there is statistical difference in terms of psychological hardiness in two groups ($p < 0.001$). Average of hardiness score in normal children parents was 103.63, while it was 72.74 in exceptional children parents. Thus, hardiness is significantly higher in the group of normal children parents compared to the group of exceptional children parents.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings suggest significant relationship between family functioning and psychological hardiness in parents of normal and exceptional children. In supporting this hypothesis it can be said that hardiness means individual's tendency to communicate with oneself and the world around him. This is not a mere hardiness or stress tolerance; rather it is the power to resistance and evolving in hard circumstances and leading to stressful events of the life. It is not like a reckless attack, rather it is the ability to understand circumstances and self-evaluate. Hardy people believe that change and positive and negative events serve as opportunities for their learning and growth. They welcome to new

experiences and they are going to face the unknown without fear. Challenge as one of the hardiness aspects reduces the pressure of the events cognitively and gives them the property of motivating rather than threatening. Other studies by Williams et al show that hardy people perceive stressful events more non-threatening compared to other people. In addition, in facing with stress they are more likely to seek for social support and attempt to solve their problems actively and practically or to confront it. On the other hand, families with a desirable functioning solve their problems in different degrees and timings. They avoid drying or fossilizing interactional processes in the family. Conflict is regarded as a positive issue in such families since it reinforces developmental processes. Thus, it is clear that one who has high functioning and views problems as challenge, and seeks for discovering new solutions should be a hardy one. (12).

On the other hand, results indicate that family functioning is significantly higher in parents of exceptional children compared to parents of normal children.

In supporting this finding it can be claimed that one of the important factors influencing on family functioning is family structure. (13) regards family structure as an invisible set of performance expectations which organize ways of communication. These communication patterns systematize behavior of family members. Family structure helps family to survive despite of changes such as children leaving home and unexpected crisis like divorce and death. In such circumstance family uses its own styles and strategies to cope with the problems (14). Family structure helps preserving its system and resisting against excessive changes. In addition, it can adapt to change in circumstances. Continued existence of the family as a system depends on an acceptable range of patterns, alternative communication patterns and flexibility in moving patterns, if necessary. Since family responds to internal and external changes, it should be able to change in such a way that it can respond to new circumstances, and at the same time it shouldn't lose its consistency which guarantees a framework for its members (13). On the other side, families with a desirable functioning solve their problems in different degrees and timings. They avoid drying or fossilizing interactional processes in the family. Conflict is regarded as a positive issue in such families since it reinforces developmental processes (15).

Parents of exceptional children should change their family structure and communication patterns and develop their own strategies due to their special issue. They should learn how to cope with many problems they have because of their child's disability, and they have to design specific solutions. They acquire problem solving skill gradually in confrontation with various types of the problems, while parents of normal children may not cope with issues in such high complexity and subsequently they would not need to seek for any specific solution. Parents of normal children might not be forced to change their communication patterns and no opportunity for nurturing might be provided. The other argument supporting higher functioning in parents of exceptional children is that though these children provide unique challenges for the family, they serve as integrity source and connect family members and make robust their relationship (7). On the other hand, families which respond to positive and negative emotional situations have high functioning (13).

Findings demonstrate that psychological hardiness is significantly higher in parents of normal children compared to parents of exceptional children.

In supporting this finding it can be mentioned that one of the hardiness components is control. Control means assuming predictability or having control over life events. Control is the opposite side of the inability. One with high control feeling cares more for effort and action than chance, while incapable person believes that there is not any relationship between positive and negative events of the life and his efforts and behaviors and events are beyond his power. On the other side, hardiness is influenced by developmental experiences, personal, emotional and motor differences (12). Parents of exceptional children have experienced an unpleasant event over which they didn't have any personal control and they believe that this event has been beyond their power and will, thus they have low control and this is influential in lower hardiness.

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