Adolescent Emotional Well-Being: A Comparative Study of Mother-And Father-Adolescent Communication Influence

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Abstract

This study has been conducted against a backcloth of Kenya's troubled secondary school system characterized by students 'indiscipline. The study compared the influence of mother- and father-adolescent communication on emotional well-being of secondary school students. It used a co relational research design. Stratified and random sampling techniques were used to select ten schools and 462 students from Uasin Gishu Sub-County. The researchers administered the questionnaires to the selected respondents. The reliability and validity of the research instruments was established through pre-testing. The study found a strong positive correlations between both mother- and father-adolescent communication and emotional well-being; mother r(462) = .45, p = .000, father r(462) = .45, p =.000. The findings may help enhance knowledge of parent-adolescent communication and may also be useful to stakeholders in education in developing communication skills training programmes as an intervention measure for adolescent problems.

Keywords: Mother-adolescent communication, father-adolescent communication, emotional well-being, secondary schools.

1.0 Introduction

This study has been conducted against a backcloth of Kenya's troubled secondary school system. The secondary schools in Kenya have been for more than a decade characterized by incidences of strikes and riots, arson attacks, immoral behavior, alcohol and drug abuse, an alarming number of girl students dropping out of school for motherhood and other forms of indiscipline (Fadhili, 2005; Mathenge, 2008; Njagi, 2008; Opondo, 2008; Republic of Kenya, 2010). The Task Force Report on Student Discipline and Unrest in Secondary Schools (Wangai Report, 2001) reported that 250 schools had experienced unrest between year 2000 and 2001. Cases of students' unrests continued to rise with many schools burnt down, property destroyed and innocent lives lost (Fadhili, 2005; Kigotho, 2009). For example, in the year 2008 more than 300 secondary schools were closed following students' unrests (Kigotho, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2009). These could be indicators of students experiencing psychological problems, negative peer pressure, and lack of general adjustment to their school situations.

The government of Kenya has reacted to these problems by banning corporal punishment in schools and recommending various discipline practices instead. It has also introduced guidance and counseling in the schools, and has been strengthening the same over the years as a way of trying to curb the problem. For example, when the government of Kenya in 2001 realized the persistence of strikes and students' unrest inspire of the introduction of guidance and counseling in the schools, it recommended the introduction of peer programmes in the schools and the training of peer counselors (Wangai Report, 2001).The government through the Ministry of Education has also been organizing for the training of teachers in guidance and counseling skills. This however, does not seem to have salvaged the situation in the schools.

It is worth noting that although numerous researches have consistently demonstrated that parent-adolescent relations is positively related to school adjustment and inversely related to the development of behavioral problems in adolescent period (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story & Perry, 2006; Demaray & Malecki, 2002; Estévez, Musitu, & Herrero, 2005; Musitu, 2005), the government and the school authorities have not linked the problem situation in schools to the students' parents. In fact, school authorities frequently invite parents of maladjusted or indiscipline adolescents to school to intervene and help change their children's maladaptive behaviors (Richena, 2009). The manners in which parents interact with their adolescent children are often reflected in parent-adolescent communication. There are studies which suggest that fathers and mothers may each separately contribute to adolescents behavior problems (Estévez et al., 2005; Moitra & Mukherjee, 2012). For example, Moitra and Mukherjee (2012) found that both mother's and father's separate communication as well as their interaction effect was linked to the development of adolescent delinquent behavior. And apart from quantity time that parents spend with their children, there are indications that parental insolvent is also qualitatively different (Videon, 2005).

However, much research on family communication has focused on communication with mother (Musitu, 2005, Shek, 1999) and the influence of mother on child development (Berg-Nielsen, Vika & Dahl, 2003). Few studies have been designed to examine the influence of father-adolescent communication on adolescent adjustment. In some studies where both mother and father-adolescent communication were assessed separately, the data were either aggregated or averaged thus giving an overall index on parent-adolescent communication (Shek, 1999). And Hoeve, Dubas, Eichelsheim, Laan, Smeenk and Gerris (2009) found that studies generally focus on one parent or both parents without differentiating the gender of the parent. Therefore, it may be illuminating to examine the differential relationships between both mother- and father- adolescent communication and adolescent emotional well-being. Much research on parent-adolescent communication has been related to parental illness and communication about sex (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, Bouris, Holloway & Casillas, 2007; Houck, Rodrigue & Labato, 2006). Taking into account the above factors, the present study did not relate parent-adolescent communication to parental illness or communication about sex, but instead focused on parent-adolescent communication in healthy families. This study compared influence of mother- and father-adolescent communication on emotional well-being of adolescents.

1.1 Communication

Human communication consists of information passing between members of a group of two or more. It is the vehicle for social interaction – the process of transmitting feelings, attitudes, facts, beliefs and ideas between living beings. While language is the primary means of communication, it is not the only means. The other means of communication is non-verbal communication which encompasses listening, touch, silences, gestures, hearing, facial expressions, vision and all other non-language symbols and clues used by persons in giving and receiving meaning (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Van-Pelt, 1984). Interpersonal communication may include all means by which individuals influence and understand one another. Melgosa (2008) underscores the importance of interpersonal communication in the following statement: Communication affects the image we portray to others and also establishes the tone of each encounter. A great deal of success and failure directly depend on the quality of communication. Good communication makes us feel accepted and understood, while deficient communication causes disappointment and misunderstanding…the words we pronounce and listen to end up carrying pleasure or pain, security and insecurity, closeness or rejection, encouragement or sadness. And beyond words, there are other messages deeply affecting others and ourselves, such as looks, gestures and tones (p.44).

The family is a primary group which is characterized by relationships that have depth of interpersonal communication. Communication in the family help provide a conducive environment in which adolescents learn appropriate social skills that enable them to build healthy relationships, handle interpersonal situations effectively, and resolve conflicts (Huff, Widmer & McCoy, 2003; Noller, 1995). Research has well established the indispensable role of open and responsive communication in facilitating healthy family relations and also in adolescent development. For example, Shek (2000) found that open parent-adolescent communication impacts family functioning and adolescents' psychosocial well-being. Hartos and Power (2000) found that it safeguards against delinquent behaviors, while Pistella and Bonati (1999) revealed that it fosters responsible sexual behavior. Open and quality communication consists of free flowing of factual and emotional information, and the presence of positive relationship characteristics within the family such as support, affection, and appropriate boundaries.

It also includes a perception of satisfaction, the degree of understanding, and lack of constraint experienced in the interaction (Barness & Olson, 1985; Scabini, Lanz, & Marta, 1999). Problem communication within the family creates strain for the individuals in the family and also disturbs the emotional climate of the entire family (Barness & Olson, 1985). Problem communication is characterized by negative styles of interaction, reluctance to share information within the family, criticism, unwarranted restriction of information, distortion of information shared, arguing and even denial of individual expression (Barness & Olson, 1985; Rosenblatt, 1994). Many research findings such as by Demaray and Malecki (2002) show that problem communication between parents and their children is key in the development of behavioral problems during adolescent period. Empirical evidence links conflicted parent-adolescent relationships to adolescent depression, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, and low school performance (Miller, Benson & Galbraith, 2001). Given that adolescents in Kenyan secondary schools have been exhibiting such behavioral problems, it could be that these problems are linked to their relations with their parents. This study therefore sought to determine the influence of parent-adolescent communication on emotional well-being of adolescents.

1.1.1 Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being is a sense of happiness and a general satisfaction with life and oneself. In the 1960s several psychologists developed similar theories to suggest that emotions result from the way people appraise their environment (Ellsworth, 1994). These appraisal theories elaborate that difference in emotions result from differences in how people perceive or interpret their environment (David & Palladino, 2004). For example, theorists like Richard Lazarus (1991) believe that cognitive activity is a precondition for emotion: That people cognitively appraise themselves and their social circumstances. These appraisals which include values, goals, commitments, beliefs and expectations determine peoples' emotions. People may feel happy because they got a job promotion they anticipated, fear because they expect to be arrested for a crime or fail an exam, angry because somebody stole from them, and so forth. Accordingly, it is expected that adolescents' emotional well-being may be influenced by their appraisal of their communication with parents.

In many studies, parent-adolescent relationships have been linked to mental, social and emotional well-being in adolescents (Borkowsky, Ramsey & Bristol-Power, 2002), delinquency (Hair, Moore & Garret, 2004), self-confidence, empathy, (Barber & Erickson, 2001). Dmitrieva, Chen, Greenberger and Gil-Rivas (2004) study of 201 United States adolescents, and 495 Czech Republic adolescents established that poorer parent-adolescent relationships influenced levels of adolescent depressed mood. With regard to these findings and others, it is evident that parents critically matter in the adjustment of their children. However, parent-adolescent communication which is key in parent-adolescent relations has not been investigated with regard to its influence on adolescent emotional well-being. There are also suggestions that types of parenting styles may also influence adolescent emotional well-being. Authoritarian/ autocratic parenting style which is described as confining and punishing (Chan & Chan, 2005; Santrock, 2004), is a parent-adolescent relationship which is characterized by giving and taking commands with little other communication present. Children from such parents are notably "unhappy, fearful, anxious about comparing themselves with others fail to initiate activity, and have weak communication skills" (Santrock, 2004, p. 277). Communication as such, is vital to the various parenting styles. This study hence compared the influence of mother- and father-adolescent communication on emotional well-being of adolescents.

1.1.2 Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question:

What is the difference between mother- and father-adolescent communication influences on emotional well-being of secondary school students?

2.0 Method

The researchers used questionnaires in data gathering because the study was mainly concerned with variables that could not be directly observed such as perceptions and feelings of respondents. And given the large sample size (N = 462) of this study, questionnaire was deemed the ideal tool for collecting data. This is because questionnaires make it possible to reach many respondents in a short time (Adler & Clark, 1999; Oso & Onen, 2005). The research population being secondary school students were largely literate and therefore did not have difficulties responding to questionnaire items. Moreover, this study was conducted during school hours when involving students in time-consuming. Open-ended interviews were considered prohibitive by the researchers.

The study was carried out in secondary schools in Uasin Gishu Sub-County, Kenya. Student population in Uasin Gishu Sub-County is high because of its urban location where many people live. This was considered to translate to varied and numerous needs of the learners that this study investigated. It has different types and categories of secondary schools. These are private and public secondary schools, boarding and day secondary schools, single sex and mixed secondary schools; national, provincial and district secondary schools. Also, some secondary schools in Uasin Gishu Sub-County continue to report rising cases of students indiscipline. This could mean that such students may be undergoing emotional problems (among other possible causes of indiscipline) which are related to the variable investigated in this study (emotional well-being).

2.1 The Population

The research population for this study comprised Form 2 and Form 3 secondary schools students drawn from Uasin Gishu Sub-County, Kenya. However, the researcher only involved boys and girls who lived with both parents since the study was investigating the influence of both mother- and father-adolescent communication.

2.1.1 Sample

This study employed stratified and random sampling techniques. Uasin Gishu Sub-County has 30 schools consisting of 24 co-educational day schools and 6 single sex boarding schools. Stratified sampling technique was used to select 10 schoolsto be included in the study, so as to have the different types of schools in their right proportions (two single sex boarding schools and eight mixed day schools).From the selected schools 30% of Form 2 and 3 students were selected using stratified and random sampling techniques. This gave a total of 462 participants. For the single sex boarding schools, random sampling was used to select 30% form 2 and form 3 students to participate in the study. The random technique ensured that each member of the research population had an equal and independent chance of being included in the sample thus eliminating any form of bias. For the mixed day schools stratified sampling technique was used to select both girls and boys in their correct proportions. A total of 30% form 2 and form 3 students were selected to participate in the study. The technique was preferred because it helped the researcher to account for the difference in subgroup characteristics, which is the number of girls and boys in their right proportions. The participants were adolescents within the age bracket of 15 to 17 years.

2.1.2 Instrumentation and Procedures

Three research instruments developed by the researchers were used in data collection- a biographical form, parent-adolescent communication inventory and emotional well-being questionnaire. A biographical form was used to collect data on the participants' profiles. On this form, participants were asked to indicate their characteristics such as gender, class level, and whether or not they lived with both parents. The second instrument used was the Parent – adolescent communication inventory. Parent - adolescent inventory is best suited for adolescents of 14 years and above living at home with both parents. The inventory is an instrument developed to obtain a measurement of positive and negative aspects of parent-adolescent communication. It consists of 25-items which show a two factor structure referring to degree of openness and extent of problems in family communication. The two subscales combine to create a composite score for parent-adolescent communication. The first one referring to the degree of openness in communication (14 items) investigates freedom of expression in communication, support, trust, affection, comprehension and satisfaction about communication, as well as conflict resolution and the perception of lack of constraint experienced in interaction.

The second one deals with problem communication (11 Items) focuses on negative communication characterized by hesitancy to share concerns, lack of trust, negative patterns of interaction, selectivity and caution in what is shared. The subscale describing the degree of openness in mother-adolescent/father-adolescent communication which items consist of favorable parent-adolescent (mother-adolescent/ father-adolescent) communication statements and are scored as follows: Strongly agree =5, agree =4, undecided =3, disagree =2, strongly disagree =1. The second subscale consisting of items describing problematic parent-adolescent (mother-adolescent/ father-adolescent) communication, has scores which are reversed in valence such that strongly agree =1, agree =2, undecided =3, disagree =4, strongly disagree =5. Thus, the response indicating the most favorable parent-adolescent (mother-adolescent/father-adolescent) communication statement is given the highest score which is 5, and the least favorable parent-adolescent communication statement is scored least which is 1. A neutral response is given a neural score which is 3. The maximum score is 125 and was considered very positive indicating open parent–adolescent (mother-adolescent/father-adolescent) communication.

The minimum score is 25 and was considered negative indicating problem parent-adolescent (mother-adolescent/father-adolescent) communication. The adolescents were asked to appraise communication with their mothers and with their fathers separately. The clarity and reliability of the items in the questionnaires was ascertained through pilot testing. The results obtained from the Parent-adolescent Inventory were a reliability coefficient of $r = 0.78$ for Father-adolescent communication scale, $r = 0.81$ for Mother-adolescent communication scale. Although many studies on parent-adolescent communication have used parent-adolescent communication scale by Barnes and Olson (1995), it was considered inappropriate for this study because after critical examination of the items it contained the researchers discovered that it does not include items on trust, affection, blame and conflict resolution which are core to family communication. Furthermore, some items on it contain wordings that may be difficult for adolescents. Since most studies that have employed it drew from the American sample, it may not have sufficient cross-culture equivalence. The present questionnaire has addressed these shortcomings. The third questionnaire used in this study is the emotional well-being scale. The scale has 10 items generating data on adolescent emotional well-being. The scale is one-dimensional and has a two-factor (sense of well-being and lack of it) structure.

The first five items (11, 12, 13, 14, and 15) deal with adolescent perception of satisfaction with life and a general feeling of happiness; which are indicators of emotional well-being. These are scored as follows: Strongly agree =5, agree =4, undecided =3, disagree =2, strongly disagree =1. The last five items (16, 17, 18, 19, and 20) focus on somatic and psychological symptoms such as headaches, anxiety, tension and fatigue, whose presence show lack of emotional well-being. These items are unfavorable emotional well-being statements and their scores are reversed in valence, hence strongly agree =1, agree =2, undecided =3, disagree =4, strongly disagree =5. The maximum score for this subscale is 50 and the minimum score is 10. The questionnaire had a test-retest reliability of $r = 0.78$.Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the National Council for Science and Technology and from the head of the schools involved.

2.1.3 Ethical Considerations

The researchers explained to the participants the objectives of the study, method of data collection, and the availability of the results before being asked to participate. The respondents were also requested to read and sign the informed consent letter before participating in the study. They were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, so that their individual identities would not be a salient feature in the research. They were not required to write their names and their school admission numbers on any of the research instruments used in data collection. The researcher assured the respondents that their responses to the questionnaire would be kept confidential and be used for purposes of this research only.

3.0 Data Analyses and Results

The data obtained from the questionnaires were manually coded, scored then accurately transcribed into a computer data file. There were no missing data. This perhaps was because the researchers administered the instruments in person. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer programme was used to analyze it. Data collected was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics involved in the study were mean scores and frequencies. The inferential statistics involved in this study was Pearson product moment correlation. All data were tested at confidence level of 95% or $\alpha = .05$. The demographics of the participants were as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Demographics of the participants

Type of school	Class level		Gender	
	Form 2	Form 3	Male	Female
Mixed schools	178	168	191	155
Single sex schools	58	58	54	62
Total	236	226	245	217

Parent-adolescent Communication and Emotional Well-being

The research question posed in this study stated that: What is the difference between mother- and father-adolescent communication influences on emotional well-being of secondary school students?

To answer this question, the participants were asked to complete a parent-adolescent communication scale which had two sections, one for mother-adolescent communication and another for father-adolescent communication. They were also asked to complete an emotional well-being scale. Their scores were computed. The scores on mother- and father-adolescent communication were correlated with scores on emotional well-being. To test the degree of association between mother- and father-adolescent communication and emotional well-being, Pearson product moment correlation (r) was computed. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation between Parent-adolescent Communication and Emotional Well-being

		Parent-adolescent communication	
		Mother-adolescent	Father-adolescent
Emotional		.452**	.452**
Well-being	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	462	462

The results indicated that there was a positive association between mother-adolescent communication and emotional well-being of secondary school students, r(462) = .45, p = .000. The analysis also revealed that there was a significant relationship between father-adolescent communication and emotional well-being of secondary school students, r(462) = .45, p = .000. The analysis further showed that mother- and father-adolescent communication equally influenced emotional well-being of secondary school students. It was therefore concluded that both mother- and father-adolescent communication equally and significantly influenced emotional well-being of the secondary school students. Students who had open communication with both parents enjoyed a higher positive emotional well-being than those who had problem communication with their parents.

3.1.1 Discussion

The objective of this study to was to compare the influence of mother-and father-adolescent communication on emotional well being of secondary school students. The finding of the study showed that both mother- and father-adolescent communication equally and significantly influenced emotional well-being of secondary school students. The results indicated that there was a positive association between mother-adolescent communication and emotional well-being of secondary school students, r(462) = .45, p = .000. The analysis also revealed that there was a significant relationship between father-adolescent communication and emotional well-being of secondary school students, r(462) = .45, p = .000. Students who had open communication with both parents enjoyed a higher positive emotional well-being than those who had problem communication with their parents. The finding of this study that mother- and father-adolescent communications influenced emotional well-being of adolescents to a similar degree is surprising. This is because mothers generally spend more time with their children since they are the primary caretakers of children and are more involved in the everyday lives of their adolescents than fathers. It was therefore expected that they would have a greater impact on their emotional well-being.

The implication of this finding is that open mother- and father-adolescent communication positively influenced adolescent emotional well-being to an equal degree. Emotional well-being has been used in this study to refer to the presence of mental health attributes such as happiness, satisfaction with life and feeling well, strong and relaxed. The findings may be explained that when parents communicate freely with their adolescents, it makes the adolescents more confident and less likely to feel lonely and threatened in the external world. This happens when they know that they are supported, accepted, and always have somebody to count on at home. Somebody who can listen to them, understand them and encourage them. It may be that when parents communicate openly with their adolescents, then these adolescents are able to open up to them, confide in them and share with them their problems and challenges. As these adolescents talk over their issues with the parents, they are helped and their stress levels are reduced leading to higher emotional well-being. In fact many studies show a positive association between adequate parent-child communication and greater life satisfaction and self-esteem, and negatively correlate it with psychological distress, and emotional difficulties (Ackard et al., 2006; Farrel & Barness, 1993; Musitu, 2005; Shirley, 1989).

Since adolescence is a turbulent period characterized by developmental changes; physical, emotional and psychological, adolescents need socio-emotional support and information from parents. Open mother-adolescent and father-adolescent communication would facilitate a smooth, stable and more peaceful adolescence, leading to emotional well-being. While problem parent-adolescent communication on the other hand would result into both psychological distress (Estévez et al., 2005) and emotional difficulties for adolescents (Shirley, 1989). The findings support the studies of Borkowsky, Ramey, and Bristol-Power (2002) and Hair, Moore, & Garret, (2004) which have linked positive parent-adolescent relationships to mental and emotional well-being of adolescents and that of Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus and Dekovic (2001) which has linked parent-adolescent relationships with psychological well-being of adolescents. The findings are also in line with those of Musitu (2005) and Shirley (1989) who found that children from families with problem parent-adolescent communication reported stress, emotional difficulties and depressive symptoms. They are also in agreement with the findings of Choo (2000) and Flouri and Buchanan (2003) who found that mother warmth and involvement was strongly correlated with adolescent emotional and psychological well-being respectively.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that both mother- and father-adolescent communication influence the emotional well-being of secondary school students to a similar degree. Students who experience open and less problem communication with their fathers and/or mothers has higher levels of emotional well-being than those who experience problem communication with either of their parents. The findings of this study point to the need for the government to implement family life education and communication skills' training programmes. Through parent education, parents can be made aware of some of the important elements of dialogue with their adolescent children and be helped to implement these in their relationships with them. Moreover, if programmes are created to help Kenyan parents and adolescents develop good communication skills, such programmes may help adolescents handle psychological issues, settle in schools and achieve good academic grades. The developed Parent-adolescent Communication Inventory in this study may be used by individual families to study and gain insight in their own mode of communication, as it can stimulate the development of healthy communication in families. Guidance and counseling teachers should adopt the instrument to help them understand and help individual students in their guidance and counseling sessions. Parents, including fathers need to recognize the continued importance of having good relationship with their adolescents, despite the fact that adolescents spend less time with their families as compared to younger children. And finally, caution is recommended in making causal inference on the basis of data available because of the correlation nature of this research. A longitudinal study may provide a clarification about the casual direction of influence.

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