

High School Students: A Cross-Cultural Perspective — The Impact of Parental Expectations on Academic Stress and Mental Health of Indian Adolescents

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Abstract—The present study investigated the cross-cultural psychological phenomenon of parental academic expectations and their empirical impact on academic stress and adolescent mental health outcomes among Indian high school students. In collectivist sociocultural frameworks, educational success is frequently construed as filial duty, transforming academic pursuits into intensive psychological stressors. A cross-sectional quantitative correlational research design was employed comprising a sample of 100 high school students (50 males, 50 females) aged 14 to 18 years across Classes 9 to 12 in Bengaluru, India. Standardized psychometric tools administered included the Perceived Parental Expectation Scale (PPES), the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA), and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21).

Results demonstrated a statistically significant robust positive correlation between perceived parental expectations and academic stress ($r = .64, p < .001$), as well as overall psychological distress ($r = .58, p < .001$). Multiple regression analysis established that perceived parental expectations and academic stress collectively accounted for 51.6% of the variance in negative mental health outcomes ($R^2 = .516, F(2, 97) = 51.72, p < .001$). Furthermore, female adolescents reported significantly higher somatic test anxiety and grade despondency. These empirical findings underscore the urgent clinical necessity for systemic parental psychoeducation, adolescent resilience-building, and systemic educational reforms.

Index Terms—Parental Expectations, Academic Stress, Mental Health, Indian Adolescents, Cross-Cultural Psychology, Filial Obligation, DASS-21, High School Students.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education plays an indispensable role in shaping the socio-economic trajectory of individuals, especially during the high school years, which represent a profoundly critical developmental window for both academic qualification and psychological maturation. In contemporary Indian society, academic performance has assumed an existential, hyper-competitive dimension. Secondary and higher secondary schooling (Classes 9 to 12) are widely perceived as the singular determining threshold for securing admissions into elite professional disciplines and guaranteeing future financial security. Consequently, high school students find themselves at the center of intensive social and familial scrutiny. Along with standard curricular demands, expectations projected by parents have emerged as the most prominent psychosocial force influencing student performance and psychological well-being. While parental involvement, encouragement, and emotional scaffolding can foster scholastic engagement and self-efficacy, disproportionate or conditional parental expectations often precipitate severe emotional distress. From a cross-cultural perspective, parental expectations in South Asian collectivist societies function markedly differently from individualistic Western cultures. In India, academic achievement is deeply intertwined with family prestige, filial obligation, and collective social standing (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). When adolescent achievement is treated as the primary vehicle of familial honor, failure to fulfill parental standards is appraised not simply as

personal shortcoming, but as moral betrayal and family shame.

Theoretical grounding for this dynamic is established across several core psychological paradigms: (a) Higgins' Self-Discrepancy Theory (1987), which explains that chronic divergence between a student's 'actual self' (realized performance) and 'ought self' (internalized standards prescribed by parents) elicits high anxiety and vulnerability; (b) Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, where the stakes of public Board Examinations combine with parental demands to form cognitive threats that far exceed personal coping resources; and (c) Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which demonstrates that conditional parental regard cripples autonomous intrinsic motivation, replacing it with debilitating external pressure.

Despite growing public discourse regarding student distress, limited empirical studies have comprehensively mapped the tripartite interaction between parental expectations, academic stress dimensions, and composite mental health outcomes using validated psychometric inventories in urban Indian schooling hubs. The present empirical study seeks to bridge this gap by evaluating how perceived parental expectations predict academic stress and subsequent depressive, anxiety, and stress symptoms among high school students in Bengaluru.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A. Research Design and Participants

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational survey design to examine the relationships among the specified variables. The sampling frame comprised high school students enrolled in secondary and senior secondary grades (Classes 9, 10, 11, and 12) aged between 14 and 18 years in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. A total sample of $N = 100$ students (50 males, 50 females; Mean age = 16.42 years, $SD = 1.18$) was drawn using purposive and stratified sampling across participating urban schools to ensure demographic and academic diversity.

B. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria required participants to be full-time registered high school students aged 14 to 18 years

following recognized national or state educational curricula (CBSE, ICSE, or State Board) who provided both student assent and parental informed consent. Exclusion criteria eliminated students with diagnosed chronic psychiatric disorders undergoing active pharmacotherapy or those unwilling to complete the assessment battery.

C. Standardized Psychometric Instruments

- 1) Perceived Parental Expectation Scale (PPES): Assesses students' perceptions of academic performance goals, parental pressure, and fear of disappointing maternal and paternal figures. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$ in the current study).
- 2) Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA; Sun et al., 2011): A 16-item standardized instrument comprising five core dimensions: Pressure from Study, Workload, Worry about Grades, Despondency, and Peer Competition. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert continuum (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).
- 3) Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995): A validated 21-item quantitative instrument measuring dimensional states of depression (dysphoria, hopelessness), anxiety (autonomic arousal, situational apprehension), and stress (chronic non-specific arousal). In this study, subscale reliabilities were .84 (Depression), .82 (Anxiety), .85 (Stress), with total scale $\alpha = .92$.

D. Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Prior institutional clearance was granted under academic guidelines at JAIN (Deemed-to-be University). Approvals were secured from school administrations in Bengaluru. Because participants were minors (aged 14–18), written institutional informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians, accompanied by written participant assent. The survey battery was administered in controlled classroom sessions with strict assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

E. Statistical Analysis

Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS (Version 28.0). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were calculated for all psychological

measures. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to assess bivariate associations. Multiple linear regression modeling was conducted to determine the explanatory power of parental expectations and academic stress on adolescent mental health. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to evaluate gender variations.

III. RESULTS

A. Descriptive and Correlational Analysis

Table 1 outlines the descriptive statistics ($M \pm SD$) and bivariate correlation coefficients among the primary variables. Perceived Parental Expectations exhibited a statistically robust positive correlation with Academic Stress ($r = .64, p < .001$) and total Psychological Distress on the DASS-21 ($r = .58, p < .001$). Academic Stress was strongly positively correlated with composite Psychological Distress ($r = .68, p < .001$).

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables (N = 100). *** $p < .001$.*

Variable	Mean $\pm$ SD	1	2	3	4
1. Parental Expectations	68.42 $\pm$ 11.20	—	.64***	.58***	.54***
2. Academic Stress (ESSA)	54.18 $\pm$ 9.85	.64***	—	.68***	.61***
3. Total Distress (DASS)	42.30 $\pm$ 12.45	.58***	.68***	—	.82***

B. Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was conducted with Total Psychological Distress (DASS-21) entered as the criterion variable and Perceived Parental Expectations and Academic Stress entered as simultaneous predictors.

The regression model was highly statistically significant, $F(2, 97) = 51.72, p < .001$, accounting for 51.6% of the variance in adolescent psychological distress ($R^2 = .516$, Adjusted $R^2 = .506$). Academic Stress emerged as the strongest relative predictor ($\beta = .53, t = 5.92, p < .001$), while Parental Expectations maintained a significant direct predictive effect ($\beta = .24, t = 2.68, p = .008$).

Table 2. Summary of multiple linear regression predicting adolescent psychological distress (N = 100). Model $R^2 = .516, F = 51.72, p < .001$.

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	β	t-statistic	p-value
(Constant)	4.12	3.84	—	1.07	.286
Parental Expectations (PPES)	0.27	0.10	.24	2.68	.008
Academic Stress (ESSA)	0.67	0.11	.53	5.92	< .001

C. Gender Comparative Differences

Independent samples t-tests revealed that while overall perceived parental expectations did not differ significantly between male ($M = 67.80, SD = 10.95$) and female students ($M = 69.04, SD = 11.52; t(98) = -0.55, p = .581$), female students reported statistically significantly higher scores on the ESSA 'Worry about Grades' dimension ($t(98) = -2.71, p = .008$) and elevated DASS-21 Anxiety scores ($t(98) = -2.12, p = .037$), indicating gendered vulnerability to evaluative strain.

IV. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this investigation validate the premise that perceived parental expectations serve as a pivotal psychosocial driver of academic stress and psychological impairment among Indian high school students. The robust correlation between parental expectations and academic stress ($r = .64$) corroborates regional research demonstrating that Indian parents often communicate high scholastic aspirations as mandatory benchmarks of filial duty rather than personal choices (Verma et al., 2002; Deb et al., 2015). The regression model, demonstrating that parental expectations and academic stress explain over half of the total variance in psychological distress (51.6%), aligns directly with Higgins' Self-Discrepancy Theory. In Indian collectivist ecology, students internalize the 'ought self' heavily conditioned by parental approval. When scholastic performance in Board exams fails to mirror these internalized parental standards, the resulting self-discrepancy translates into acute emotional vulnerability, manifesting as depressive despair, somatic anxiety, and persistent nervous tension.

Crucially, the higher test anxiety and grade worry observed in female students highlights differential socialization patterns. Studies suggest adolescent girls often exhibit higher emotional empathy and sensitivity to interpersonal relationships within the Indian household, causing them to internalize academic expectations more intensely as a duty to family reputation.

A. Educational and Policy Implications

These findings carry urgent systemic implications: (1) School Counseling Paradigms: Institutional guidance programs must shift from remedial academic coaching toward proactive systemic family counseling, helping parents balance ambitious goals with emotional warmth and unconditional acceptance; (2) Curricular De-Escalation:

The data provide robust empirical support for India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) directives aimed at diminishing the high-stakes, all-or-nothing nature of standard Board Examinations through continuous formative assessment structures.

B. Methodological Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment: First, the cross-sectional design precludes definitive causal claims. Second, the sample of $N = 100$ was drawn from urban private and aided schools in Bengaluru; extending sampling to semi-urban and rural cohorts across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds will enrich generalizability. Finally, incorporating multi-informant data (direct parent reporting alongside student self-reports) represents a valuable direction for future research.

V. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that excessive parental academic expectations exert a profound detrimental impact on adolescent mental health, operating primarily through heightened academic stress. In collectivist Indian society, where academic success is considered the supreme marker of filial devotion, high school students experience significant vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and psychological burnout. Addressing this pervasive adolescent crisis necessitates collective interventions spanning family psychoeducation, mental health literacy in schools, and structural reforms in high-stakes testing culture.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical Statement: Institutional ethical approval was obtained under academic protocol at JAIN (Deemed-to-be University). Written parental consent and student assent were secured for all participating minors prior to survey administration.

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Data Availability: The de-identified survey dataset generated and analyzed during the study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable academic request.

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