Family Structure and Happiness Level: A Comparative Study Among Higher Secondary School Students of Regular Schools

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Abstract— **A family is traditionally defined as a group of people connected by blood, marriage, or adoption, sharing a household, emotional bonds, and mutual support (Barnard, 2026). The two-family structures examined in this study were nuclear and joint families. Happiness refers to a state of well-being characterised by positive emotions, from contentment to joy, and is a key concept in Positive Psychology (Seligman et al., 2005). The present study compared happiness levels among 160 higher secondary school students from Classes XI and XII, comprising 56 students from joint families and 104 from nuclear families. A quantitative, cross-sectional comparative research design was employed. Happiness was measured on a five-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater happiness. Descriptive statistics and Welch's independent-samples t-test were used to compare four subgroups: Class XI girls, Class XI boys, Class XII girls, and Class XII boys. The findings showed a mixed pattern: joint-family girls in Class XI and boys in Class XII reported higher mean happiness scores, whereas nuclear-family boys in Class XI and girls in Class XII scored higher. Only the Class XII girls' comparison was statistically significant (p = .039). The overall mean scores were 4.362 for joint-family students and 4.341 for nuclear-family students, indicating a negligible difference. The findings suggest that family structure alone may not consistently explain students' happiness. Emotional support, family relationships, communication, and the school and social environment may also contribute. Further research using validated measures, larger samples, and multivariable analyses is recommended.**

Index Terms— **Happiness, Family Structure, Joint Family, Nuclear Family, Adolescents, Higher Secondary Students, Subjective Well-Being**

I. INTRODUCTION

A family is traditionally defined as a group of people united by ties of blood, marriage, or adoption who share a household, love, and mutual support. In modern social and legal contexts, a family also includes groups bound by deep emotional commitment, shared values, and long-term care rather than strict biological or legal links (Barnard, 2026.). Family constitutes an important social environment in which adolescents develop emotional security, interpersonal relationships and a sense of well-being. The common Types of Families include, Nuclear Family: Two parents and their children living in a separate home, Extended / Joint Family: Parents, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins living together or close by.Single-Parent Family: One parent raising one or more children. Blended Family: Partners with children from previous relationships who form a new unit and Family of Choice: Close friends or peers who build a deep, supportive network akin to kinship. The Key Social functions of a family are1. Support: Provides emotional, psychological, and physical care, 2. Socialization: Teaches children cultural norms, values, and life skills and 3. Security: Acts as a basic economic and safety unit for its members. Happiness is a complex mental and emotional state of well-being characterized by positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy. Happiness is one of the main themes explored within the theoretical framework of Positive Psychology (Seligman et al., 2005). The term happiness is interchangeable with "subjective well-being," which is typically measured by asking people

about how satisfied they feel with their lives (evaluative), how much positive and negative emotion they tend to feel (affective), and their sense of meaning and purpose (eudaimonic). In her 2007 book The How of Happiness, positive psychology researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky elaborates, describing happiness as "the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile." Adolescence is a significant developmental period characterised by physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes. During this stage, young people develop a stronger sense of identity, become increasingly concerned with peer relationships and academic expectations, and begin to establish greater independence from their families. The quality of their social environment can influence how they experience and interpret everyday life. Happiness is an important dimension of psychological well-being. In psychological research, happiness is frequently considered alongside subjective well-being, positive affect and life satisfaction. Diener (1984) described subjective well-being as a broad construct involving individuals' evaluations of their lives, including affective experiences and cognitive judgements of life satisfaction. Happiness, therefore, is not determined exclusively by external circumstances; it also reflects how individuals perceive and respond to their experiences. The family is one of the earliest and most enduring social environments in a child's life. It can provide affection, guidance, protection, emotional reassurance and opportunities for social learning. Family relationships may also influence how adolescents cope with academic pressure, interpersonal difficulties and everyday challenges.

In the Indian context, families commonly include a range of living arrangements, including nuclear families, consisting primarily of parents and their children, and joint families, in which extended family members share a household or family life. Joint families may provide additional companionship, shared caregiving and support from grandparents and other relatives. Nuclear families may offer greater privacy, autonomy and direct parental involvement. However, neither arrangement necessarily guarantees a positive or negative emotional environment. The quality of relationships within the family may be more consequential than household structure alone.

The present study was undertaken to examine whether happiness scores differ between higher secondary school students from joint and nuclear families. Comparisons were made separately among girls and boys in Classes XI and XII. This approach allows the study to explore whether the descriptive pattern differs across class and gender groups rather than assuming that family structure has the same association with happiness for every adolescent.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE (ROL)

Izzo, Baiocco and Pistella (2022), the present research represents the first systematic review of the literature on the relation between happiness (i.e., subjective well-being, life satisfaction, positive affect) and family functioning in families with children aged 6-18 years. Relevant articles were systematically searched in three scientific databases (i.e., PsycInfo, Pubmed, and Web of Science) in June 2022. The databases were searched for original articles published after 1968 with the keywords "happiness" and "family functioning. "Results of the 2683 records recovered, 124 original articles met the eligibility criteria and were included in the review. The articles were divided according to four emergent themes: (1) family dimensions and happiness; (2) global family functioning (i.e., family functioning, and family relationships), environmental variables, and happiness; (3) parental differences; (4) longitudinal studies. The results of the review provide evidence for a positive relation between happiness and family functioning, across different cultures and age groups: Family dimensions (e.g., cohesion, communication) were found to strongly predict children's and adolescents' happiness. Future studies should investigate the differences between fathers and mothers using multi-informant and mixed methods procedures and a longitudinal research approach. The implications of the findings for children's positive development are discussed.

Verrastro, et.al (2020) This study examines how family functioning, the parent-child relationship and personal factors are related to happiness in 1549 children aged 7 to 14 years old (53% females) in Italy. Children and pre-adolescents completed a set of questionnaires on self-rated happiness, self-concept and loneliness. At least one of their parents filled in questionnaires on family functioning, attachment and their child's happiness level. No gender differences

were found in the direct measure of happiness, but younger participants were happier than older participants, according to both the children's and parents' evaluations. Happiness is influenced by positive self-concept, self-esteem and low levels of satisfaction but family functioning does not seem to play a major role. The clinical and social implications of the study are discussed.

Wikle and Hoagland (2020) This study examines how often adolescents interact with family members and how adolescents feel when spending time with parents, non resident parents, stepparents, siblings, and extended family members. Adolescents respond to whom they spend time with, and how adolescents feel during social interactions with family has implications for adolescent relationships. Family structure remains a crucial dimension of heterogeneity in adolescent life, and family systems theory suggests family structure could differentially shape adolescent emotional functioning and social development due to differences in family-level contexts. However, less work has evaluated heterogeneity in social interactions and adolescent responses to family interactions stemming from variation in the home context. Using a large, nationally representative data sample of adolescents from the American Time Use Survey (N = 1,735), this study employs a within-group analysis to separately examine feelings of meaningfulness, happiness, sadness, and stress during social interactions for adolescents living in nuclear homes, single-parent homes, and stepparent homes. Results suggest adolescents in nuclear homes benefited from interactions with parents and were less affected by siblings and extended family members. On the other hand, adolescents in nonnuclear homes benefitted from interactions with non-resident parents, older siblings, or extended family members, giving support to compensation models of family interactions. The study informs parents, clinicians, and policymakers designing interventions for adolescents, because it more precisely conveys information about which family members positively influence adolescent emotional responses.

Zhenzhu Wu (2014) This study is to investigate the influential factors on the happiness of high school students with questionnaires in Guangdong province. The results show that family, health, character, life, ideal, learning, friend, education, leisure are the influential factors on happiness. Among these influential factors, family is the most influential factor on high school students' happiness, followed by health.

Diener (1984) Reviews the literature since 1967 on subjective well-being (SWB [including happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect]) in 3 areas: measurement, causal factors, and theory. Most measures of SWB correlate moderately with each other and have adequate temporal reliability and internal consistency; the global concept of happiness is being replaced with more specific and well-defined concepts, and measuring instruments are being developed with theoretical advances; multi-item scales are promising but need adequate testing. SWB is probably determined by a large number of factors that can be conceptualized at several levels of analysis, and it may be unrealistic to hope that a few variables will be of overwhelming importance. Several psychological theories related to happiness have been proposed; they include telic, pleasure and pain, activity, top–down vs bottom–up, associationistic, and judgment theories. It is suggested that there is a great need to more closely connect theory and research

III. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Happiness and emotional well-being are important aspects of adolescent development. Higher secondary students face academic demands, decisions about further education, changing social relationships and expectations regarding future careers. Understanding the family contexts in which these students live may help educators, counsellors and parents identify relevant areas for support.

In Indian society, joint and nuclear families may differ in household composition, caregiving arrangements, privacy, responsibilities and opportunities for intergenerational interaction. However, the psychological experiences of adolescents within these arrangements can vary considerably. A comparative investigation of happiness levels can contribute to a more evidence-based understanding of the relationship between family structure and adolescent well-being. Such research may also discourage generalisations about family types and encourage greater attention to the emotional quality of family relationships.

IV. HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses were formulated:
H01: There is no statistically significant difference in the mean happiness scores of Class XI girls from joint and nuclear families.
H02: There is no statistically significant difference in the mean happiness scores of Class XI boys from joint and nuclear families.
H03: There is no statistically significant difference in the mean happiness scores of Class XII girls from joint and nuclear families.
H04: There is no statistically significant difference in the mean happiness scores of Class XII boys from joint and nuclear families.
H05: There is no statistically significant overall difference in happiness scores between students from joint and nuclear families.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using a quantitative and comparative approach. Descriptive Statistics were used to measure the happiness scores for independent groups (Class XI / XII for both Boys and Girls in comparison with by family structure (Nuclear and Joint Family).

VI. RESEARCH DESIGN

A cross-sectional, comparative research design was used. Students from Class XI and Class XII Girls and Boys were compared with Family Structure (joint and nuclear families).

Group	Joint Family		Nuclear Family	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Class XI				
Class XII				

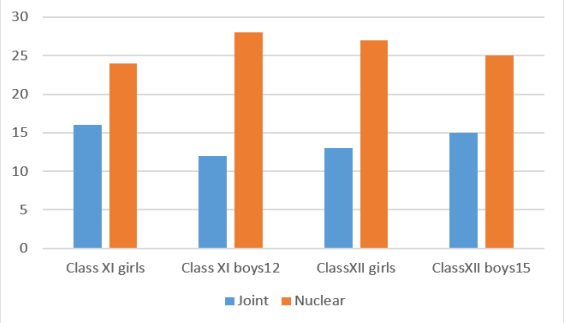
VII. SAMPLE AND SAMPLE SIZE

A total of 160 students consisting of 40 in each group of Class XI Girls and Boys respectively and 40 in each group of Class XII Girls and Boys respectively, were selected for the research study. But out of these a total of 56 students (both boys and girls) belonged to joint families and 104 students (both boys and girls) belonged to nuclear families. The sample distribution for the family structure is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by class, gender and family structure

Class and Gender	Joint Family (n)	Nuclear Family (n)	Total (n)
Class XI Girls	16	24	40
Class XI Boys	12	28	40
Class XII Girls	13	27	40
Class XII Boys	15	25	40
Total	56	104	160

Fig.1: Graph of Students of Class XI and XII with Family Structure



Inclusion criteria
1.Students enrolled in Class XI or Class XII in regular schools.
2.Students classified as belonging to either a joint or a nuclear family.
3. Students for whom valid happiness-scale scores were available.
4.Students who participated voluntarily, with appropriate consent and assent procedures.

Exclusion criteria
1.Students outside the specified classes.
2.Students with missing or unusable happiness-scale data.
3.Students whose family structure could not be classified using the study's definitions.
4.Students without the required consent or assent.

Variables
Independent variable: Family structure, classified as joint family or nuclear family.

Dependent variable: Happiness score measured on a five-point scale.
Subgroup variables: Class (XI or XII) and gender (girls or boys).

Tools
Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), by Hills.P, & Argyle,M.(2009), a 29-item tool measuring general psychological wellbeing and happiness was utilised for this research study. Scoring was reported on a five-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater happiness.

VIII. PROCEDURE AND DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected from students in Classes XI and XII using OHQ. Prior to the Data Collection, a consent letter was taken from the school Principal to conduct this research. The school authorities were also informed that confidentiality of the school children shall be taken care of. Demographic details of school children such as schools name, gender, class and structure of family they belong to such as joint or nuclear were taken in the Demographic form prepared by the author. After that the students were asked to fill the OHQ. The data was later analysed.

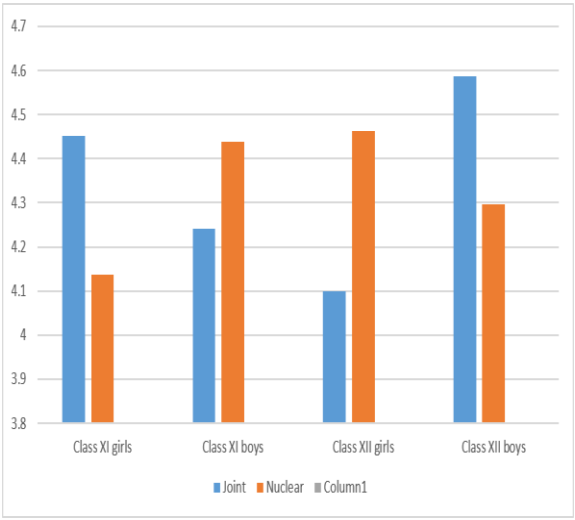
Statistical Analysis
Descriptive statistics was applied which included sample size (N), mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) and Welch's independent-samples t-test to compare joint-family and nuclear-family students for each of the four class-and-gender subgroups.

Results

Table 2. Happiness scores by family structure, class and gender

Class and gender	Family structure	N	Mean	SD
Class XI girls	Joint	16	4.454	0.5710
Class XI girls	Nuclear	24	4.1375	0.5131
Class XI boys	Joint	12	4.241	0.6264
Class XI boys	Nuclear	28	4.439	0.3912
Class XII girls	Joint	13	4.100	0.5218
Class XII girls	Nuclear	27	4.462	0.3888
Class XII boys	Joint	15	4.586	0.4470
Class XII boys	Nuclear	25	4.296	0.5789

Fig. 2: Graph depicting the Mean of the Students in Class XI and XII



Impression:
The descriptive statistical results showed that the mean difference varied across the subgroups. Joint-family students had higher mean scores among Class XI girls and Class XII boys and Nuclear-family students had higher mean scores among Class XI boys and Class XII girls.

Table 3. Welch's independent-samples t-test results

Class and gender	Joint mean	Nuclear mean	Difference (joint − nuclear)	t	df	Two-tailed p
Class XI girls	4.454	4.1375	0.3165	1.788	29.85	.084
Class XI boys	4.241	4.439	−0.1980	−1.014	14.82	.327
Class XII girls	4.100	4.462	−0.3620	−2.222	18.66	.039
Class XII boys	4.586	4.296	0.2900	1.774	35.43	.085

IX. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results from Table 3, reveals that the mean happiness score of girls from joint families (M = 4.454, SD = 0.5710) of Class XI was higher than that of girls from nuclear families (M = 4.1375, SD = 0.5131). The difference was not statistically significant, t (29.85) = 1.788, p = .084. Hence H01 was not rejected. But the probable reason behind such a result is that students from joint family may experience opportunities of companionship, emotional support and interaction with extended family members. Students feel more secured and safe being in a joint family. There is mutual understanding among family members and shared responsibilities become an added benefit. However, because the difference was not statistically significant, this interpretation remains tentative and gives us the scenario that nuclear families too are in supportive terms for the close-knit family members in comparison to joint families. There are advantages of residing in both nuclear and joint families.

Results from Table 3 reveals that Class XI Boys from nuclear families (M = 4.439, SD = 0.3912) had a higher mean happiness score than boys from joint families (M = 4.241, SD = 0.6264). The difference was not statistically significant, t (14.82) = −1.014, p = .327. Accordingly, H02 was not rejected. This result is just the opposite for girls of Class XI where girls from joint families mean was found to be more than boys. The presumed reason for such a result reveal that students may be often perceived to have more individual freedom, personal autonomy, and reduced pressure to conform to strict patriarchal hierarchies in a nuclear family as compared to a joint family.

Results from Table 3 reveals that Class XII girls from nuclear families (M = 4.462, SD = 0.3888) had a higher mean happiness score than girls from joint families (M = 4.100, SD = 0.5218). The difference was statistically significant at .05 level, t (18.66) = −2.222, p = .039. and therefore, H03 was rejected. The tentative reason for such a result maybe that class 12 is the crucial time for career building for both boys and girls. Girls feel more secured in nuclear families as there are fewer family members, they feel closely knit, have more privacy, autonomy and less responsibilities. During this crucial time, girls get a conducive environment for long hours of study for preparing board exams and other competitive examinations. They usually schedule they study time hours, sleep timings and are closer with their parents too. Hence these reasons may be genuine depicting significance of the study statistically.

Results from Table 3 reveals that Class XII boys from joint families (M = 4.586, SD = 0.4470) had a higher mean happiness score than boys from nuclear families (M = 4.296, SD = 0.5789). The difference was not statistically significant, t (35.43) = 1.774, p = .085. Accordingly, H04 was not rejected. In joint families the other family members provide reassurances to the students who are supposedly preparing for their careers. This supportive environment bring solace to the study burnt out situations for students. The shared household responsibilities enable the students to focus more on their future endeavours and reduces feelings of isolation during long stressful study hours.

Table 4. Pooled happiness scores by family structure

Family structure	N	Overall weighted mean	Approximate SD
Joint family	56	4.362	0.560
Nuclear family	104	4.341	0.481

The pooled mean happiness scores were approximately 4.362 for joint-family students and 4.341 for nuclear-family students. The difference was approximately 0.021 points on the five-point scale. An exploratory Welch comparison based on these pooled summaries yielded approximately t = 0.23, p = .82. This indicates no statistically significant overall difference in the unadjusted comparison.

The negligible difference in happiness scores between students from joint and nuclear families indicates that a student's happiness does not primarily depend on the family structure. There are many core factors that can relate to this kind of result between joint and nuclear family systems focussing the happiness of students. Both the family structure (joint and nuclear family) has their advantages and disadvantages that ultimately balance each other out, resulting in a similar net impact on a student's happiness.

Students in nuclear families are easily maintaining deep, daily emotional bonds with extended family members and relatives through a wide spectrum of digital telecommunication, video calls and messaging, replicating the emotional safety environment of a joint family.

The modern joint families are now functioning independently although staying under one roof. In this scenario, the parents are both working to meet their needs, due to busy work schedules, work pressures, restrictions, time fluctuations, and low quality and quantity time to their children. Whereas the nuclear families often live to the fullest because of their autonomy, privacy and high focussed parental attention and affection to their children, although there are also chances of feelings of isolation, loneliness in children when both parents are working .

Along with these the students happiness is also influenced by parental conflicts, frictions at home, negative attitudes of family members, peer pressures, peer comparisons, sibling rivalry, partiality, extracurricular engagements, nutritional deficiencies, quality health care, educational opportunities, friends involvements, digital and social media, safety and security etc, These are often seen irrespective of family structure – joint or nuclear families where the students reside .

These results can be considered alongside the broader literature. Izzo et al. (2022) found that family functioning, including cohesion and communication, is associated with children's and adolescents' happiness. Wikle and Hoagland (2020) similarly demonstrated that adolescents' emotional experiences can vary according to the family context and the relatives with whom they interact. These studies support examining the quality and nature of family relationships rather than relying exclusively on household classification.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Parent–school collaboration to focus on supportive relationships, communication and students' individual needs.
2. Schools to promote emotional well-being through guidance, counselling and age-appropriate life-skills programmes.
3. Teachers and counsellors to identify students experiencing persistent distress, social isolation or academic pressure and facilitate appropriate support.
4. Research on Family members comparison between children, criticism and unrealistic academic achievements on children.,
5. Research to measure family functioning, family cohesion, perceived support, family conflict, socioeconomic status and academic stress alongside family structure.
6. Research to recruit larger samples from diverse schools and geographical areas.

XI. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. The numbers of joint-family and nuclear-family students differed in this study with 56 and 104 students respectively. The smaller subgroups may limit the precision of individual comparisons.
2. A single scale score cannot fully represent the complexity of adolescent well-being. Qualitative information or additional measures could provide a richer understanding of students' experiences.

XII. CONCLUSION

The present study compared happiness scores among 160 higher secondary school students from joint and nuclear families. The results revealed that Joint-family students had higher mean scores among Class XI girls and Class XII boys, whereas nuclear-family students had higher mean scores among Class XI boys and Class XII girls. Only the comparison among Class XII girls was statistically significant. The pooled mean happiness scores were also very similar for joint- and nuclear-family students. Therefore, the findings do not establish a consistent or statistically robust overall difference in happiness between the two family structures in this sample. Family structure should not be considered in isolation when understanding adolescent well-being. The quality of family relationships, communication, emotional security, parental support, peer relationships and school experiences may also be important.

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