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A Comparative study of parenting and parental absence as represented in English literature, supported by Psychological theories

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Abstract:
Parenting styles play a pivotal role in shaping a child's psychological and emotional development. This study aims to compare traditional parenting with parental absence and examines multiple parenting styles and their respective emotional and psychological effects on child development and well-being. A mixed-method approach was used, combining quantitative (closed-ended questions) and qualitative (open-ended questions) data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of parenting styles. Data were collected through questionnaires administered to 201 participants aged between 15 and 30 years, from diverse urban and rural backgrounds.

The findings reveal clear psychological differences between the two groups. Adolescents raised with traditional parenting, particularly under authoritarian and authoritative styles, often reported anxiety and difficulty expressing emotions. In contrast, individuals who experienced parental absence were more likely to report higher levels of emotional insecurity, low self-confidence, and feelings of chronic loneliness. Additionally, a pattern of emotional detachment was observed among traditionally parented adolescents, despite earlier strong attachments, suggesting developmental or career-related influences.

In conclusion, the study suggests that each parenting style has its own significance and distinct psychological impacts. Among all these variables, emotional support emerges as a critical factor. Regardless of the family structure or physical presence, when parents provide consistent emotional support, it significantly contributes to the healthy emotional development of the child.

Keywords: *Parenting styles, parental absence, emotional development, psychological well-being, emotional support*

1. Introduction

Parenting plays a foundational role in shaping an individual's character and emotional Identity, a theme that has been extensively explored in English Literature through representation of family, authority, presence and absence, and emotional conflict. Literary texts such as "Tara" by Mahesh Dattani, Hard Times and David Copperfield by Charles Dickens, Sons and Lovers by D H. Lawrence and Taste of Honey by Shelag Delaney portays how parental control, emotional neglect, parental absence and presence deeply influence a character's identity, behaviour, and emotional growth.

Developmental research, notably Diana Baumrind's work, identifies four primary parenting styles- authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and uninvolved- each associated with distinct behavioural and emotional outcomes in children and adolescents (*Baumrind*).

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby**,** emphasizes that early bonds with caregivers strongly shapes later emotional security and social relationships (Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*). Together, these frameworks suggest that parenting practices influence not only childhood development but also long-term mental health outcomes. Although a substantial body of literature documents the short and long- term effects of traditional parenting styles, comparatively, very few studies have examined the experiences of children facing parental absence and is emotional and psychological outcomes. This gap is especially significant in cultural contexts such as India, where family networks, social expectations, and parental roles deeply influence parenting styles. In addition, few studies have directly examined emotional support and it's important as a mediating factor across different family structures.

This study addresses this gap by comparing psychological and emotional outcomes among adolescents and young adults raised under traditional parenting styles with those who experiences parental absence. Employing a mixed-method design, this research combines qualitative measures and quantitative responses to identifies anxiety, emotional expression, self-confidence, and to explore how emotional support influence these outcomes.

2. Research objectives

1. To analyse the psychological impact of traditional parenting and parental absence through an interdisciplinary lens combining literary representations and empirical data.
2. Examine the emotional and mental health outcomes of parental absence (separation, death or divorce).
3. Compare the behavioural and emotional development outcomes of those raised in traditional parenting with those raised in parental absence.
4. Assess the role of consistent emotional support as a mediating factor in psychological well-being across diverse family structures.

3. Literature Review

Parenting is a dynamic process in which parents' behaviours, attitudes an emotional response is profoundly shaping a child's development. Research consistently demonstrates that behind a child's cognitive, emotional and social growth, that is a parental influence, while parental treatment and interactions affected by child's genetic composition and temperament (twin and adoption studies). Thus, Parenting is not a one-way process but a complex interplay between parent and child characteristics.

Parenting styles significantly impact children's emotional regulation, self-confidence, and social adjustment. Authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth, reasoning and structure, promotes self-reliance, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving skills. In contrast, children who are well behaved when young but they raised under authoritarian parenting emphasises strict rules and obedience, often they child less confident a rebellious when parental oversight is absent. Children with Impulsive behaviours are often raised under permissive parents with fewer boundaries, while parents' Lack of emotional engagement and lead children to feelings of loneliness and poor social adjustment in uninvolved parenting.

For positive parenting Emotional -coaching is an important aspect. Which parents' guide their children in recognising, regulating and expressing own emotions and feelings, effective problem solving and healthy social relationships (Gottaman et al.1997; Cupach C Olson, 2006). Parental confirmation, validating and recognizing children's emotions, boosts self -esteem and relieves stress (Schrodt, Ledbetter C Ohrt, 2007). Conversely, emotional disapproving parent's laisser-faire approaches may impair children's emotional regulation, demonstrating emotional support plays the crucial role in development. Traditional parenting practices, often emphasising respect, obedience, and moral value, may unintentionally suppress emotional expression, leading to internal conflict or anxiety. Similarly, parental absence, whether physical or emotional, can cause deeper psychological challenge, including feelings of abandonment, difficulty forming Secure attachments, and long-term Social or emotional difficulties. Contemporary studies recognize father's role as a central contributor For children's cognitive, emotional and social outcomes (Lamb, 1975), In the response of historical parental research focused primarily on mothers, less fathers involved in caregiving.

Individual differences in parenting also depend on the parent's personality, temperament and relational dynamics, emphasizing that parenting is shaped by both personal qualities and rational contexts. Empirical findings support that effective parenting includes providing love, warmth, Listening, and spending quality time with children while promoting autonomy and self- confidence. Democratic, emotionally supportive approaches foster mutual trust and acceptance, helping children navigate challenges and develop adaptive behaviours. The emotional-coaching practices, authoritative guidance and father involvement indicates the mutual contribution of parenting and its impact on child development.

The findings also relevant with major psychological theories. Baumrind's parenting styles highlights how authoritative parenting bring up confidence and balance, while authoritarian or neglectful parenting may hinder growth. Erikson's psychological theory suggests that supportive parenting leads trust and identity, meanwhile lack of support can lead to doubt and instability. Moreover, Bowlby's attachment theory emphasizes caregiver bonds, how parental absence disturb children's emotional well-being. Together, these theories underscore how parenting deeply shapes psychological outcomes.

Several literary critics have examined the role of family and parental influence in shaping literary characters. Texts such as Dattani's Tara and Delaney's A Taste of Honey highlights effects of neglectful parenting. Dickens's novels frequently depict absent or neglectful parents, suggesting that emotional deprivation leads to moral confusion and social alienation. In David Copperfield, Dickens highlights the importance of nurturing parental figures, whose emotional support and guidance David's psychological growth and resilience.

4. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the emotional and psychological impact of traditional parenting and parental absence, from the perspective of participants. A questionnaire method was chosen to collect descriptive and opinion-based responses. A total of 201 participants were selected using purposive, convenience, and snowball techniques. The sample included school and college students aged 15 to 30 from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Only individuals who were willing to share their experiences.

Data were collected through a Google Form questionnaire consisting of 42 questions, including both multiple-choice items for summarization of trends and open-ended questions for gaining insights into personal experiences. The questions focused on participants' experiences with parenting styles, emotional and psychological effects, current mental health, relationships with parents and others, and personal opinions on parental presence or absence.

The questionnaire was distributed via WhatsApp. Participants were informed that participation was completely voluntary and that responses would remain confidential. Data collection was conducted over a period of 164 days (5 months and 14 days). To maintain ethical standards, no personal identifying information was collected apart from basic details relevant to the research (e.g., age, household composition). All participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study. The responses will be analyzed as follows.

Open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic coding and keyword analysis to explore patterns of emotional expression. Multiple-choice responses were summarized as percentages and presented using charts and graphs for visual representation.

5. Findings

5.1 Emotional impact of parenting styles

In this study, 84% of participants reported that their parents were physically present during their childhood. However, only 77% felt comfortable sharing their problems with their parents, while 22% admitted they could not share anything with them. This suggests that mere parental presence is not enough to foster emotional connection. Children need to feel emotionally safe and confident that their parents will listen without

judgement when they open up. Some participants shared that their parents either ignored their emotional needs or listened without offering meaningful support. Only 57% of participants reported that their parents consistently showed affection, 23% said it occurred occasionally, and 16% said it happened rarely. These figures highlight the importance of emotional availability and warmth in building trust and openness between parents and children. These findings show connection with Bowlby's Attachment Theory, which emphasizes the importance of secure and stable bond between caregivers and child.

5.2 Effects of parental absence

According to the responses, 15% of participants experienced parental absence during childhood. These individuals expressed feelings of neglect, emotional unavailability, lack of trust, an emotional avoidance. Interestingly, similar challenges were also reported by participants raised in traditional parenting environments, indicating that emotional absence can exist even in physically present households. Common emotional impacts included loneliness, confusion, and a sense of abandonment. A small number of participants reported that feeling excluded from family activities, favouritism towards their siblings or cousins, base contributed to feelings of neglect an emotional distance from their parents.

This type of experience was not limited to those with physically absent parents some participants raised in permissive environments also reported emotional neglect, demonstrating that parenting style significantly influences emotional security.

5.3 Current mental health and self-perception

A significant majority 74% of participants acknowledged that their childhood experience is directly influenced their current mental health and emotional well-being. Many indicated that their upbringing still impacts their interpersonal trust, self-esteem, communication in relationships and emotional regulation. Common struggles included overthinking, self-doubt, and fear of expressing their emotions or needs.

5.4 Relationship with parents and others

Several participants emphasized that their early relationships with their parents have continued to affect their present relationships. Those raised in nurturing environments described their childhood as loving, warm, and emotionally supportive. While Many from traditional parenting backgrounds appreciated the discipline and structure, some noted emotional distance and a lack of intimacy In contrast, Participants who experienced parental absence reported more negative impacts, often citing unresolved emotional trauma. This has Continued to affect their ability to form emotional connections and express their feelings openly.

5.5 Examples include Positive experience

Several participants emphasised that shared family routines, such as spending time together, supportive role of their parents, parental sacrifices and encouragement, fostered a stronger emotional bond with their parents and sense of belonging.

5.6 Negative Experience

Some participants highlighted their negative experiences, such as parental conflict and divorce, domestic violence, frequent family conflicts. These experiences left them with long-lasting emotional scars, affected their ability to trust and a sense of insecurity. These findings connect with Baumrind's parenting model.

5.7 Reflections on parenting and future aspirations

Participants expressed a wide range of opinions on the parenting styles they experienced. While many appreciated the structure and discipline of traditional parenting, others pointed out its emotional distance and lack of openness. Participants who experienced parental absence often described feelings of loneliness, but also highlighted the positive role of alternate caregivers like grandparents, teachers, and friends. These findings confirm Erikson's view on parental guidance. Parental guidance and support play a major role in building stable relationship, identity and development during adolescence. When asked about that future approach to parenting: 29% said they would follow the same parenting style as their parents. 41% preferred a blended

approach -combining their parents' Methods with more open and emotionally supportive strategies. 11% stated they would completely reject their parents' parenting style and adopt a new one based on their own values and experiences.

5.8 Gender an emotional sensitivity

The data revealed that 74% of the participants were female while 26% were male. Female participants demonstrated a greater level of emotional sensitivity and reported a stronger emotional connection with their parents. By contrast, male participants described A weaker emotional bond with their parents, which often translated into withdrawal, expressions of anger, or struggles in maintaining other Interpersonal relationships.

5.9 Parental support and career experiences

While female participants experienced closeness in emotional relationships, many expressed dissatisfactions regarding the lack of parental support in career related decisions and aspirations. This lack of encouragement often created a sense of frustration. Male participants, on the other hand reported the opposite trend: they experienced less emotional intimacy with parents, but at the same time, acknowledged receiving considerable parental support in their educational and career pursuits.

5.10 Influenced of birth order

Birth order also emerged as an influential factor in adolescents' experiences. First-born children generally felt a heavier sense of responsibility than their younger siblings. First- born daughters, in particular, recalled being raised in an emotionally nurturing environment, yet also reported facing greater pressure and expectations compared to younger daughters. Among male participants, elder sons similarly acknowledged greater responsibilities, though they also enjoyed more freedom an autonomy compared to their younger brothers.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study address its central aim of comparing the psychological effects of traditional parenting and parental absence. In line with the research questions, the results reveal, most participants who grew up under traditional parenting reported feeling secure and stable in their relationships with others, emotionally balanced, and strongly connected to their families. At the same time, some respondents reported that the authoritative approach occasionally created difficulties in making important life decisions. They also reported anxiety when trying to express themselves freely, challenges in openness with others, and occasional struggles with trust. This suggests that parental presence alone is not sufficient- active involvement and emotional responsiveness are equally important in shaping a child's development.

In contrast, participants raised in circumstances of parental absence experienced higher levels of anxiety, loneliness, an emotional insecurity compared to others. However, several also emphasized that love and affection from alternative caregivers- such as grandparents or extended family members- sometimes compensated for the absence of parents and contributed positively to their growth. In some cases, such children were nurtured as effectively as those raised in traditional households. Nonetheless, most respondents reported that parental absence left an enduring emotional gap. These outcomes strongly resonate with Bowlby's Attachment Theory, which underlines the necessity of a secure and stable caregiver -child bond for healthy psychological and emotional development. Respondents nurtured under authoritative parenting often displayed strong self-identity nd high self-confidence, while those raised under authoritarian parenting showed mixed results. These findings correspondence with Erik Erikson's stage of identity vs. role confusion, which highlights the role of parental support in helping adolescents form a stable sense of self on the other hand those who grew up without one or both parents due to divorce, death, or migration- showed low self-confidence, confusion about their social role, and frequent self-doubt, which sometimes manifested in academic difficulties or social withdrawal. These findings support Erikson's claim that parental guidance and encouragement are central to the formation of a coherent identity during adolescence.

Participants raised under Baumrind's authoritative parenting style also demonstrated stronger communication skills, decision-making abilities, problem-solving capacity, and adaptability. Positive early

experiences not only enhanced their personal development but also strengthened their ability to form and sustain healthy relationships in adulthood, conversely, individuals raised under authoritarian or neglectful parenting frequently displayed tendencies toward withdrawal, rebellion, low motivation, and indecisiveness. Because they were seldom encouraged to exercise independence, many reported feeling "stuck" when faced with complex choices. Similarly, parental absence was often associated with long-term difficulties, including risky behaviours, heightened anger, and struggles with trust and attachment in intimate adult relationships.

Taken together, these findings reaffirm the strong connection between parenting style and psychological development. They also illustrate that while alternative caregivers can offer meaningful emotional support, the unique role of parents in fostering attachment and identity is difficult to replace. Importantly, the study highlights that challenging childhood circumstances do not always result in negative outcomes – some participants showed resilience and adaptability despite parental absence, suggesting the possibility of positive growth through adversity. Despite these valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small, and some responses may have been influenced by personal biases or prejudices. In addition, while the study briefly considered factors such as birth order and family composition, these aspects – along with socio-economic status – require deeper investigation to fully understand their influence.

Finally, emerging technological and social changes raise new concerns. If children become increasingly emotionally detached from their parents due to the overuse of digital media, they may also struggle to form meaningful emotional bonds with others later in life. Future research should therefore explore how evolving family structures, digital habits, and migration trends influence attachment, identity, and emotional well-being.
Overall, the findings of this study affirm that parental presence and involvement play a critical role in shaping children's psychological outcomes. While other caregivers can provide love and support, parents play a unique and enduring role in establishing the emotional connection necessary for secure attachment, identity formation, and long-term well-being. "The golden rule of parenting is: do unto your children as you wish your parents had done unto you." -Louise Hart

7. Conclusion

The present study investigated the psychological and emotional consequences of traditional parenting styles, particularly authoritative and authoritarian, in conjunction with parental absence and neglect, guided by theoretical perspectives of Erik Erikson, John Bowlby, and Diana Baumrind. These findings suggest that children reared within emotionally supportive and balanced parenting environments exhibit greater resilience, stability, and positive developmental outcomes. By contrast, children exposed to parental absence of neglect face challenges in emotional regulation, trust formation, and identity development.

Underpinned by psychological theory and supported by contemporary evidence, this study explores the crucial role of supportive parenting in promoting healthy development. While the study is not without limitations, it underscores that parental presence goes beyond material or household responsibilities. More importantly, it serves as an essential pillar for the development of trust, identity, and emotional well-being in children.

Moreover, the results of this study offer guidance for parents, educators, and those responsible for developing policies related to child development and welfare, suggesting that promoting emotionally supportive environments can significantly enhance children's psychological well-being. The study was restricted by its sample size and demographic diversity, which may affect the external validity of the results. Future research could examine the long-term effects of parenting styles, offering deeper insights into child development. Furthermore, the study contributes to theoretical understanding by highlighting how contemporary evidence aligns with and extends the frameworks proposed by Erikson, Bowlby, and Baumrind.

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