

Family communication and spiritual struggles as predictors of psychological vulnerability in young adults

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Abstract: The present study explored how family communication and spiritual struggles predict psychological vulnerability in young adults. A sample of 300 young adults including 153 males and 147 females were selected through purposive sampling. Participants completed standardized measures, including the Family Communication Scale, the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale, and the Psychological Vulnerability Scale. Correlation analysis was conducted using the Pearson Product–Moment Correlation Coefficient to examine the relationship between the study variables. Results revealed a significant positive correlation between spiritual struggles and psychological vulnerability indicating that higher levels of spiritual struggles are associated with greater psychological vulnerability. Additionally, a significant negative correlation was found between family communication and spiritual struggles, suggesting that better family communication is linked with fewer spiritual struggles. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis further revealed that spiritual struggles significantly predicted psychological vulnerability, while family communication found as a significant negative predictor of spiritual struggles. These findings highlight the critical role of family communication and spiritual conflict in shaping young adults' psychological well-being.

Keywords:

Family communication,
psychological vulnerability,
spiritual struggles,
university students,
young adults

DOI : [10.20885/iscip.vol2.art3](https://doi.org/10.20885/iscip.vol2.art3)



The relationships, beliefs, and psychosocial developments of young adulthood determine their mental and emotional health throughout life. This developmental stage is commonly referred to as emerging adulthood, which occurs between the ages of 18 and 25. Furthermore, it is characterized by various changes such as academic or career-related goals, changing relationships, and a shift in dependency from family. Family communication patterns, spiritual struggles, and mental health issues seem to play a critical role in defining their overall well-being (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Exline et al., 2014; Mahoney, 2010). These factors not only affect the person's development but also provide avenues for change to enhance resilience and well-being. Spiritual struggles such as internal conflicts about one's beliefs, purpose, or relationship with the divine can intensify psychological vulnerability, especially when left unaddressed.

Walsh suggests that open and supportive family communication is protective against anxiety and depression, while dysfunctional communication increases psychological risks. Similarly, unresolved spiritual struggles are linked with heightened psychological symptoms such as hopelessness, guilt, and existential despair. Proper coping with spiritual conflicts is essential, specifically in young adults, who are the most prone to existential questions. By creating home environments in which spiritual matters can be discussed freely and without conflict, families can facilitate resilience related to spiritual struggles, thereby helping young adults to foster adaptive frameworks for understanding spiritual values and beliefs.

Psychological vulnerabilities in young people may stem from a combination of genetic, environmental, and situational factors. Some may be born prone to develop anxiety or depression, but the primary causes lie in the environment, which encompasses family and spiritual issues. Such vulnerabilities are likely to be magnified by stressful life events, unresolved family conflicts, and spiritual struggles, which in turn compromise adaptive coping and psychological health.

Empirical research underlines the role of family in communication and its ability to bring psychological change, particularly in young adults. For instance, found that families with an emphasis on conversation orientation, in which children are encouraged to talk and listen, develop children who are more emotionally stable and better at resolving conflict. Such young adults have strong coping mechanisms in dealing with stress and transitional periods in their lives, and this is a good representation of the role of family communication. On the other hand, such youths with a family institutional orientation are likely to be disadvantaged in terms of self-efficacy and are more vulnerable to depression and anxiety.

Research on spiritual struggles also focuses on their capacity for both growth and distress. conducted a longitudinal study that showed that those who resolved spiritual conflicts constructively reported greater psychological well-being and a

greater sense of purpose. Unresolved spiritual struggles, however, were associated with increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and existential despair.

This study addresses that gap by examining the correlation between family communication, spiritual struggles, and psychological vulnerability among university students in Pakistan. It also tests the predictive value of these variables in explaining emotional distress.

METHOD

A correlational research design was used to explore the relationship between family communication, spiritual struggles, and psychological vulnerability. A purposive sampling technique, a type of non-probability sampling, was used to recruit participants who met the predefined inclusion criteria and who were willing to participate in the study. A total of 300 participants including 153 males and 147 females were selected from university campuses, and data were collected accordingly. All participants were fluent in Urdu and currently enrolled in academic programs. Initially, 350 students were approached across university campuses. Out of these, 300 consented and completed the required questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of approximately 85.7%. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained and informed consent was taken from all participants. Data were collected using standardized instructions, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality. Participants completed four tools: a demographic information sheet, the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales-IV (Family Communication and Family Satisfaction subscales), the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (RSSS), and the Psychological Vulnerability Scale (PVS). Data were analyzed using the latest version of SPSS. The statistical techniques applied included correlation analysis, regression analysis depending on the nature of the data and research objectives.

RESULT

This section includes detailed analysis of the study. The aim of the study was to assess the correlation and predictive relationship among family communication, spiritual struggles and psychological vulnerabilities.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Age of the Participant (N=300)

Variable	M	SD
Age (in years)	21.5	2.21

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

The above table shows the mean and standard deviation of the age of the participants, the minimum age of the participants was 18 years, and maximum age was 26 years.

Table 2

Correlation among family communication scale, religious and spiritual struggles and psychological vulnerability scale (N = 300)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1- FCS	38.18	9.66	1									
2- FSS	31.96	8.87	.71**	1								
3- RSSS	47.36	17.07	-.21**	-.14*	1							
4- RSSSF1	9.77	3.82	-.18**	-.14*	.89**	1						
5- RSSSF2	7.27	3.22	-.24**	-.13*	.90**	.73**	1					
6- RSSSF3	6.69	2.73	-.17**	-.10	.84**	.71**	.68**	1				
7- RSSSF4	9.13	3.61	-.23**	-.16**	.89**	.71**	.81**	.67**	1			
8- RSSSF5	7.35	3.15	-.14*	-.12*	.86**	.74**	.72**	.68**	.72**	1		
9- RSSSF6	7.14	2.91	-.17**	-.07	.87**	.73**	.75**	.75**	.72**	.66**	1	
10- PVS	14.47	5.34	-.12*	-.14*	.49**	.48**	.46**	.43**	.41**	.42**	.41**	1

*Note: *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, FCS = Family Communication Scale, FSS = Family Satisfaction Scale, RSSS = Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale, PVS = Psychological Vulnerability Scale.*

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was carried out to investigate the relationship between family communication, spiritual struggles and psychological vulnerability in young adults. The above table shows the Mean, standard deviation and correlation values of the scales and the factors. The results shows significant positive relationship between family communication and family satisfaction and negatively correlation with religious and spiritual struggles, its subscales, and psychological vulnerability. Moreover, religious and spiritual struggles are found to be positively correlated with its subscales and psychological vulnerability. Lastly, psychological vulnerability showed negative correlation with both family communication and satisfaction which means increase in healthy family communication decreases the psychological vulnerabilities.

Table 3

Multiple Hierarchical Regression Analysis to Predict Psychological Vulnerability

Variables	B	95% CI for B		SE B	β	R ²	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Step 1						.036	.036
Constant	23.30 ***	16.45	30.15	3.48			
Age	-.18	-.45	.09	.14	-.07		
Gender	-1.12	-2.34	.09	.62	-.11		
Family System	-.34	-1.57	.90	.63	-.03		
FSS	-.09*	-.16	-.02	.035	-.15		
Step 2						.27	.24**
Constant	12.80 ***	6.07	19.53	3.42			
Age	-.14	-.39	.10	.12	-.06		
Gender	-.47	-1.57	.63	.56	-.04		
Family System	-.48	-1.57	.61	.56	-.04		
FSS	-.07	-.15	.01	.04	-.11		
FCS	.03	-.05	.11	.04	.06		
RSSSF1 (Divine)	.33**	.07	.58	.13	.23		
RSSSF2 (Demonic)	.36*	.03	.71	.17	.22		
RSSSF3 (Moral)	.24	-.08	.56	.16	.12		
RSSSF4 (Interpersonal)	-.07	-.34	.21	.14	-.05		
RSSSF5 (Doubt)	.05	-.23	.34	.15	.03		
RSSSF6 (Ultimate Meaning)	-.01	-.34	.32	.17	-.01		

Note. N= 300, CI= confidence interval, LL= lower limit, UL= upper limit, FCS= Family Communication Scale, FSS= Family Satisfaction Scale, RSSS= Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale, *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

A hierarchical multiple regression was done to explore if family communication, family satisfaction, and religious or spiritual struggles could predict psychological vulnerability, after first accounting for some basic demographic factors. In the first step, age, gender, family system, and family satisfaction (FSS) were added to the model. This model turned out to be statistically significant, $F(4, 295) = 2.74$, $p = .029$, and explained about 3.6% of the differences in people's psychological vulnerability. Out of these factors, only family satisfaction was a predictor that means people who were more satisfied with their family felt less psychologically vulnerable.

In the second step, family communication (FCS) and six types of religious and spiritual struggles (RSSS_F1 to RSSS_F6) were added to the model. This made the model much stronger and still statistically significant, $F(11, 288) = 9.81$, $p < .001$, now explaining 27.3% of the differences in psychological vulnerability. This means the added variables explained an extra 23.7% of the variance. Two types of religious struggles were significant predictors: struggles with Divine (RSSS_F1) and struggling with Demonic powers (RSSS_F2). People who reported more of these struggles were more likely to feel psychologically vulnerable. Other factors, like family communication and the remaining types of spiritual struggles, didn't show a meaningful impact in the final model.

DISCUSSION

The aim of study was to explore the relationship among family communication, spiritual struggles, and psychological vulnerability in university students. The first hypothesis proposed that family communication and family satisfaction would be negatively correlated with religious and spiritual struggles. This result aligns with prior research and can be explained by the relational nature of religious meaning-making. Psychologically, open and supportive family communication fosters secure attachment and encourages the healthy expression of doubts and concerns. In contrast, rigid or punitive family environments can heighten internal religious conflicts. Culturally, in Pakistani families where religion is often transmitted intergenerationally, family warmth and open dialogue can buffer against guilt and shame associated with religious questioning. Moreover, developmental theories suggest that adolescents and young adults rely heavily on family as a source of emotional regulation and values formation. Therefore, positive family dynamics reduce the likelihood and intensity of spiritual struggles. Moreover, the study's results supported this hypothesis. Positive family dynamics have been associated with reduced spiritual struggles. found that adolescents with supportive parental relationships reported fewer religious conflicts. Similarly, emphasized the role of family in fostering spiritual development and mitigating struggles.

Another hypothesis stated that family communication and family satisfaction would be negatively correlated with psychological vulnerability. This result can be interpreted through well-established developmental and psychological theories. High-quality family communication fosters emotional security, reduces feelings of isolation, and enhances self-regulation all of which are protective against anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation. Psychologically, when young adults perceive their families as emotionally supportive and open to dialogue, they are more likely to process their stress in adaptive ways rather than internalize it. In Pakistani culture, where collectivist family norms are dominant, emotional interdependence within families plays a major role in buffering against psychological distress. Biologically, secure and nurturing family environments are associated with lower allostatic load and healthier cortisol rhythms in adolescents and young adults. Therefore, both the emotional and physiological effects of healthy family dynamics explain the observed negative correlation with psychological vulnerability. Moreover, supportive family environments have been linked to lower psychological vulnerability. reported that adolescents from families with open communication exhibited fewer depressive symptoms. also highlighted the protective role of positive parenting on college students' mental health.

Another hypothesis proposed that religious and spiritual struggles would be positively correlated with psychological vulnerability. This relationship is consistently supported by literature linking spiritual conflict with emotional distress. Psychologically, unresolved spiritual struggles often involve feelings of abandonment by God, retaliatory religious beliefs, or conflict with religious authorities — all of which are associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and low self-worth. In the Pakistani context, where religion forms a core part of social identity and moral structure, struggling with spiritual beliefs can lead to heightened distress due to perceived disapproval from family or community. Additionally, spiritual struggles may impair coping mechanisms, leading individuals to feel directionless or hopeless, especially during transitional life phases such as young adulthood. Biologically, chronic emotional stress caused by such internal conflict can dysregulate neuroendocrine function, further contributing to psychological vulnerability. Thus, the positive correlation between spiritual struggles and psychological vulnerability is explained through interconnected psychological, cultural, and physiological pathways.

It was hypothesized that family communication, family satisfaction, and religious and spiritual struggles would significantly predict psychological vulnerability. This result reflects the complex relationship between protective and risk factors in psychological health. High family satisfaction and effective

communication are protective against distress, while spiritual struggles serve as a significant risk factor. This aligns with ecological and systems theories, which emphasize the role of multiple contextual factors, including family dynamics and spiritual beliefs, in shaping psychological well-being. Psychologically, when family systems are emotionally open and supportive, individuals develop healthier coping strategies that buffer against internal stressors. On the other hand, spiritual struggles often intensify emotional turmoil by intensifying feelings of guilt, meaninglessness, or abandonment. In collectivist societies, these dynamics are amplified due to stronger family bonds and societal emphasis on religious conformity. Together, these factors explain how positive family dynamics and negative spiritual experiences jointly contribute to psychological vulnerability in young adults.

CONCLUSIONS

The study found that there is a significant positive correlation between religious and spiritual struggles and psychological vulnerability. Family satisfaction and family communication were found to be negatively correlated with both religious struggles and psychological vulnerability. Moreover, spiritual struggles and family communication significantly predict psychological vulnerability in young adults. The findings suggest that emotional distress in university students may be alleviated by addressing both interpersonal and spiritual domains. The results underscore the importance of holistic, culturally sensitive mental health practices.

SUGGESTION

Mental health practitioners should incorporate family dynamics and spiritual concerns into assessment and intervention strategies. Universities should also consider providing counseling services that address spiritual distress and promote healthy communication skills. Future research should explore these variables longitudinally and across different cultural groups.

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