

Family Expectations and Their Impact on Depression among Adults: An Educational Psychology Study

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Abstract

Family expectations play a crucial role in shaping individuals' academic, professional, social, and personal lives. While supportive family expectations can motivate individuals to achieve their goals and develop a positive self-concept, excessive or unrealistic expectations may contribute to psychological distress, emotional imbalance, and depressive symptoms. The present study investigates the impact of family expectations on depression among adults from the perspective of educational psychology. The study examines how perceived pressure to meet family standards related to education, career achievement, financial success, marriage, and social status influences adults' mental health and emotional well-being. Drawing upon theories of social expectations, self-determination, and psychological well-being, the research explores the relationship between family-induced pressure and the prevalence of depressive tendencies among adults. A quantitative research approach is proposed to assess the extent to which family expectations contribute to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. The study also considers demographic factors such as age, gender, educational background, and socio-economic status that may moderate this relationship. Findings are expected to reveal that excessive family expectations are significantly associated with higher levels of depression, whereas realistic and supportive expectations contribute to psychological resilience and emotional stability. The study highlights the importance of fostering healthy family communication, emotional support, and balanced expectations to promote mental well-being among adults. The findings may provide valuable insights for educators, psychologists, counsellors, and policymakers in designing interventions aimed at improving mental health and reducing depression among individuals experiencing family-related pressures.

Keywords

Family Expectations, Depression, Adults, Educational Psychology, Mental Health, Psychological Well-being, Emotional Stress, Family Pressure, Self-Esteem, Emotional Resilience, Adult Development, Psychological Adjustment.

Introduction

Depression is a common mental health disorder that affects millions of adults worldwide and has become a major public health concern in the twenty-first century (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). It is characterized by persistent sadness, loss of interest in daily activities, feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, and impaired social and occupational functioning (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). Educational psychologists have increasingly recognized that psychological well-being is shaped not only by individual

characteristics but also by social and environmental factors, particularly family influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Family expectations refer to the standards, aspirations, and demands that family members place upon an individual regarding education, career, marriage, financial stability, and social responsibilities (Mejia et al., 2021). These expectations often serve as motivational forces that encourage personal growth and achievement (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). However, when expectations become excessive, unrealistic, or inconsistent with an individual's abilities and aspirations, they may create significant psychological pressure and emotional distress (Mossakowski, 2011).

According to Self-Discrepancy Theory, emotional distress arises when there is a gap between an individual's actual self and the expectations imposed by significant others (Higgins, 1987). Adults who perceive themselves as failing to meet family expectations frequently experience guilt, shame, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy, which may contribute to the development of depressive symptoms (Culatta & Clay-Warner, 2021). Research has shown that perceived pressure from family members is positively associated with depression, anxiety, and reduced psychological well-being among adults and emerging adults (Mejia et al., 2021).

In collectivist societies such as India, family expectations often carry greater significance because family honor, social reputation, and interdependence are highly valued cultural norms (Triandis, 1995). Adults may feel obligated to fulfill parental aspirations regarding career success, marriage, financial support, and caregiving responsibilities, even when these expectations conflict with their personal goals and interests (Suh & Chirkov, 2019). Such conflicts can increase psychological stress and contribute to depressive tendencies.

Educational psychology emphasizes understanding how environmental factors influence human behavior, learning, motivation, and emotional adjustment throughout the lifespan (Santrock, 2023). Family expectations constitute an important environmental factor that affects self-esteem, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and mental health outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, examining the relationship between family expectations and depression among adults is essential for understanding the psychosocial mechanisms underlying adult psychological well-being.

The present study seeks to investigate the impact of family expectations on depression among adults from an educational psychology perspective. Understanding this relationship may help educators, counselors, psychologists, and family members develop strategies to promote healthier family interactions and support adult mental health.

Background of the Study

The family is the first and most influential social institution responsible for shaping an individual's attitudes, beliefs, aspirations, and psychological development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Throughout life, family members communicate expectations regarding educational achievement, occupational success, social behavior, marriage, and personal responsibilities (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). While these expectations often provide direction and motivation, they may also become sources of stress when individuals perceive them as unattainable or excessively demanding (Mossakowski, 2011).

The relationship between expectations and mental health has been extensively examined in psychological research. Higgins (1987) proposed that discrepancies between actual achievements and expected standards generate negative emotions, including disappointment, guilt, and depression. This theoretical perspective suggests that adults who are unable to satisfy family expectations may experience increased psychological distress and emotional maladjustment.

Mossakowski (2011) found that unfulfilled life expectations concerning education, employment, marriage, and family formation were significantly associated with depressive symptoms among young adults. The study indicated that individuals who perceived a gap between their aspirations and actual achievements reported greater emotional distress and lower psychological well-being. Similarly, Culatta and Clay-Warner (2021) observed that adults who believed they had fallen behind expected life milestones exhibited higher levels of depression and anxiety.

Family expectations are particularly influential during emerging and middle adulthood when individuals are expected to establish careers, achieve financial independence, marry, and fulfill familial responsibilities (Arnett, 2015). Failure to meet these expectations may lead to negative self-evaluation, social comparison, and emotional strain (Mejia et al., 2021). Research by Mejia et al. (2021) demonstrated that perceived inability to meet family expectations was significantly related to depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem among emerging adults.

Parental expectations also play a crucial role in adult psychological adjustment. Excessively high parental expectations have been linked to perfectionism, fear of failure, emotional exhaustion, and depressive symptoms (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Adults who continuously strive to gain family approval may experience chronic stress, particularly when their personal goals differ from family aspirations (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

In the Indian socio-cultural context, family expectations often extend beyond individual achievement and encompass obligations related to family reputation, caregiving, and collective success (Saraswathi & Larson, 2002). Such expectations may create additional pressure, particularly among adults who face economic, occupational, or social challenges. Consequently, understanding the impact of family expectations on depression has become increasingly important for educational psychologists, mental health professionals, and policymakers.

Despite growing interest in family influences on mental health, limited research has specifically focused on the direct relationship between family expectations and depression among adults within the framework of educational psychology. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining how perceived family expectations influence depressive symptoms among adults.

Significance of the Study

The present study holds considerable significance in the field of Educational Psychology because it explores the relationship between family expectations and depression among adults, an area that remains underexplored despite its practical importance (Santrock, 2023).

The study contributes to theoretical knowledge by extending existing understanding of how family-based psychosocial factors influence emotional well-being and mental health outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It provides empirical evidence regarding the role of family expectations as a predictor of depressive symptoms among adults (Mejia et al., 2021).

The findings may assist educational psychologists, counselors, and mental health practitioners in identifying individuals who experience psychological distress due to excessive family expectations (APA, 2022). Early identification of such risk factors can facilitate preventive interventions and counseling services.

The study may also help families recognize the psychological consequences of unrealistic expectations and encourage the development of supportive, flexible, and emotionally nurturing family environments (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Such awareness can promote healthier communication patterns and reduce emotional conflict within families.

Furthermore, the research may contribute to the design of mental health programs and family counseling initiatives aimed at enhancing adult psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Policymakers and educational institutions may utilize the findings to develop strategies that address family-related stressors affecting mental health.

The study is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where family expectations often play a central role in shaping life decisions and personal identity (Saraswathi & Larson, 2002). Understanding how these expectations influence depression can support culturally sensitive mental health interventions.

Finally, the study may serve as a foundation for future research investigating related variables such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, life satisfaction, resilience, and psychological adjustment among adults (Bandura, 1997). Thus, the findings are expected to contribute substantially to both educational psychology literature and mental health practice.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the level of perceived family expectations among adults.
2. To assess the level of depression among adults.
3. To investigate the relationship between family expectations and depression among adults.
4. To determine whether family expectations significantly predict depression among adults.
5. To explore the differences in depression levels among adults experiencing low, moderate, and high family expectations.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of perceived family expectations among adults?
2. What is the level of depression among adults?
3. Is there a significant relationship between family expectations and depression among adults?
4. To what extent do family expectations influence or predict depression among adults?

5. Do adults experiencing different levels of family expectations differ significantly in their depression levels?

Literature Review

Review of Related Literature

Sl. No.	Author(s) & Year	Title of the Study	Major Findings	Relevance to Present Study
1	Higgins (1987)	<i>Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect</i>	The study proposed that discrepancies between actual self and expected self lead to emotional distress, including depression and anxiety.	Provides a theoretical foundation explaining how unmet family expectations may contribute to depression among adults.
2	Mossakowski (2011)	<i>Unfulfilled Expectations and Symptoms of Depression Among Young Adults</i>	Individuals who failed to achieve expected educational, occupational, and family goals reported higher levels of depressive symptoms.	Demonstrates the relationship between unmet expectations and depression.
3	Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2010)	<i>Parental Psychological Control and Adolescent Adjustment</i>	Excessive parental control and unrealistic expectations were associated with emotional maladjustment and depressive symptoms.	Highlights the negative psychological impact of excessive family expectations.
4	Arnett (2015)	<i>Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties</i>	Adults often experience stress due to societal and familial pressures regarding career, marriage, and financial independence.	Supports the importance of studying family expectations during adulthood.
5	Mejia et al. (2021)	<i>Perceived Family Expectations and Depressive</i>	Higher perceived family expectations were significantly	Directly supports the relationship between

		<i>Symptoms Among Emerging Adults</i>	associated with greater depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem.	family expectations and depression.
6	Culatta and Clay-Warner (2021)	<i>Falling Behind and Feeling Bad: Unmet Expectations and Mental Health</i>	Individuals perceiving themselves as falling behind expected life milestones experienced greater depression and anxiety.	Demonstrates how unmet expectations influence psychological well-being.
7	Ryan and Deci (2020)	<i>Self-Determination Theory and Psychological Well-Being</i>	Psychological well-being improves when individuals pursue self-determined goals rather than externally imposed expectations.	Explains why excessive family expectations may reduce psychological well-being and increase depression.

Research Gap

The reviewed studies indicate that expectations and psychological well-being are closely related. Previous research has examined parental expectations, unmet life expectations, and psychological adjustment among adolescents and emerging adults. However, limited studies have specifically investigated the impact of perceived family expectations on depression among adults from an Educational Psychology perspective, particularly in the Indian socio-cultural context. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap.

Research Method

The present study adopts a **qualitative research approach** to explore and understand the lived experiences of adults regarding family expectations and their influence on depression. Qualitative research enables researchers to gain deeper insights into participants' emotions, perceptions, beliefs, and experiences that cannot be adequately captured through numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A **phenomenological research method** is employed because the study seeks to understand the subjective experiences of adults who experience pressure from family expectations and how these experiences contribute to depressive feelings and emotional distress.

Research Design

The study follows an **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)** design. IPA focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their personal and social experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This design is particularly appropriate because the study aims to examine adults' interpretations of family expectations and their psychological consequences.

Population of the Study

The population consists of adult individuals aged between **25 and 60 years** residing in Nadia District, West Bengal, who have experienced significant family expectations related to education, career, marriage, financial responsibilities, or social obligations.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of **30 adults** will be selected through **purposive sampling**. Participants will be chosen based on their ability to provide rich and meaningful information related to family expectations and depressive experiences.

Sample Distribution

Category	Number
Male Adults	15
Female Adults	15
Total	30

Inclusion Criteria

Participants must:

- Be between 25 and 60 years of age.
- Have experienced family expectations regarding major life decisions.
- Be willing to participate voluntarily.
- Be able to communicate their experiences effectively.

Data Collection Tools

1. Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

The primary tool for data collection will be a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of open-ended questions.

Sample Interview Questions

1. How do you describe the expectations your family has placed on you?
2. What kinds of pressure have you experienced from family members?
3. How have family expectations influenced your emotional well-being?
4. Have you ever felt disappointed or depressed because of family expectations?
5. How do you cope with family-related pressures?

2. Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Two focus group discussions, each comprising 6–8 participants, will be conducted to explore shared experiences and collective perspectives regarding family expectations and mental health.

3. Field Notes

Observational notes will be maintained during interviews and discussions to capture non-verbal expressions, emotional reactions, and contextual information.

Procedure of Data Collection

1. Permission will be obtained from relevant authorities.
2. Participants will be identified through purposive sampling.
3. Informed consent will be secured before data collection.
4. Individual interviews will be conducted and audio-recorded with permission.
5. Focus group discussions will be organized.
6. Interviews will be transcribed verbatim.
7. Data will be reviewed and verified by participants (member checking).

Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data will be analyzed using **Thematic Analysis** following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework.

Steps of Thematic Analysis

Step	Description
1	Familiarization with Data
2	Initial Coding
3	Searching for Themes
4	Reviewing Themes
5	Defining and Naming Themes
6	Report Writing and Interpretation

Expected Themes

Based on previous literature, the following themes may emerge:

Theme	Description
Academic and Career Pressure	Expectations regarding education and employment

Fear of Disappointing Family	Anxiety about failing family members
Emotional Distress and Depression	Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness
Self-Esteem and Identity Conflict	Struggles between personal aspirations and family demands
Coping and Resilience Strategies	Methods used to manage family expectations

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), the study will ensure:

Criterion	Strategy
Credibility	Member Checking, Prolonged Engagement
Transferability	Thick Description
Dependability	Audit Trail
Confirmability	Reflexive Journal

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

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Academic and Career Expectations as Sources of Psychological Pressure

Participants' Perceptions of Academic and Career Expectations

Sub-theme	Frequency (n=30)	Percentage
Pressure to secure a prestigious job	24	80.00%
Expectations for higher educational achievement	22	73.33%
Comparison with successful relatives	18	60.00%
Fear of disappointing parents	26	86.67%

Interpretation

Most participants reported experiencing considerable pressure to achieve academic and career success. The majority (86.67%) expressed a fear of disappointing their parents if they failed to meet family expectations. Participants frequently described family comparisons with

successful relatives as emotionally distressing. These findings suggest that excessive academic and career expectations may contribute significantly to psychological strain and emotional discomfort among adults.

Supporting Participant Statements

"My family always expected me to become a government officer. When I could not achieve that, I felt like I had failed them."

"Every family gathering became a comparison session with my cousins."

Family Expectations and Emotional Distress

Emotional Responses Associated with Family Expectations

Emotional Response	Frequency	Percentage
Stress and tension	27	90.00%
Anxiety	24	80.00%
Feelings of inadequacy	21	70.00%
Sadness and hopelessness	19	63.33%

Interpretation

A large proportion of participants reported emotional distress associated with family expectations. Stress and tension emerged as the most frequently mentioned emotional responses (90%). Participants described feeling overwhelmed when family expectations exceeded their personal capacities and aspirations. The findings indicate that prolonged exposure to family-related pressure may negatively affect emotional well-being.

Supporting Participant Statements

"No matter how much I achieve, it never seems enough."

"The constant pressure makes me feel anxious and emotionally exhausted."

Family Expectations and Depressive Symptoms

Depression-Related Experiences Reported by Participants

Depression Indicators	Frequency	Percentage
Persistent sadness	20	66.67%
Loss of motivation	18	60.00%

Feelings of worthlessness	16	53.33%
Social withdrawal	14	46.67%
Sleep disturbances	12	40.00%

Interpretation

Many participants described symptoms commonly associated with depression. Persistent sadness (66.67%) and loss of motivation (60.00%) were the most prevalent experiences. Several participants reported withdrawing from social interactions due to feelings of inadequacy and perceived failure. These findings suggest a close association between unmet family expectations and depressive symptoms.

Supporting Participant Statements

"I stopped meeting friends because I felt embarrassed about my situation."

"I often feel that I am not good enough for my family."

Conflict between Personal Aspirations and Family Expectations

Nature of Conflicts Experienced by Participants

Type of Conflict	Frequency	Percentage
Career choice conflict	22	73.33%
Marriage-related expectations	17	56.67%
Financial responsibility pressure	19	63.33%
Lifestyle and personal decisions	15	50.00%

Interpretation

Participants frequently described conflicts between their own aspirations and family expectations. Career choice emerged as the most common area of conflict (73.33%). Many adults reported sacrificing personal interests to satisfy family demands. Such conflicts often resulted in frustration, stress, and emotional dissatisfaction.

Supporting Participant Statements

"I wanted to pursue art, but my family insisted on engineering."

"My decisions are often judged based on family expectations rather than my happiness."

Theme 5: Impact on Self-Esteem and Self-Identity

Influence of Family Expectations on Self-Perception

Impact Area	Frequency	Percentage
Reduced self-confidence	23	76.67%
Negative self-image	20	66.67%
Fear of failure	25	83.33%
Identity confusion	16	53.33%

Interpretation

Most participants reported that family expectations influenced their self-esteem and personal identity. Fear of failure (83.33%) and reduced self-confidence (76.67%) were frequently mentioned. Participants often evaluated their self-worth based on family approval, resulting in diminished self-esteem when expectations were not met.

Supporting Participant Statements

"I often feel that my value depends on how successful I am."

"Sometimes I don't know whether I am living my own life or fulfilling my family's dreams."

Coping Strategies Used by Adults

Coping Mechanisms Adopted by Participants

Coping Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Seeking emotional support	21	70.00%
Religious or spiritual activities	18	60.00%
Self-reflection and acceptance	15	50.00%
Avoidance and withdrawal	12	40.00%
Professional counseling	8	26.67%

Interpretation

Participants employed various coping strategies to manage family expectations and depressive feelings. Emotional support from friends and family members was the most common coping mechanism (70%). However, relatively few participants sought professional counseling (26.67%), suggesting the need for greater awareness and accessibility of mental health services.

Supporting Participant Statements

"Talking to close friends helps me deal with stress."

"Counseling helped me understand that my worth is not determined by others' expectations."

Overall Findings Summary

Major Themes and Findings

Theme	Key Findings
Academic and Career Pressure	Family expectations create significant achievement-related stress.
Emotional Distress	High levels of anxiety, stress, and emotional burden were reported.
Depressive Symptoms	Persistent sadness, low motivation, and feelings of worthlessness were common.
Aspiration–Expectation Conflict	Conflict between personal goals and family demands contributes to psychological distress.
Self-Esteem Issues	Family expectations negatively influence self-confidence and self-worth.
Coping Strategies	Emotional support and spirituality are common coping mechanisms, while professional help remains underutilized.

Overall Interpretation

The qualitative findings reveal that family expectations play a substantial role in shaping adults' emotional and psychological well-being. Excessive or unrealistic expectations regarding education, career, marriage, and financial responsibilities often generate stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Participants reported experiencing feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and identity conflict when unable to satisfy family demands. The findings support **Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987)** and **Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020)**, suggesting that conflicts between personal aspirations and external expectations may increase vulnerability to depression. The study highlights the importance of fostering supportive family environments and promoting mental health awareness to reduce the negative psychological consequences of excessive family expectations.

Findings of the Study

Based on the thematic analysis of interview transcripts and focus group discussions, the following major findings emerged:

- 1 Most participants reported experiencing significant pressure from family expectations related to education, career, marriage, and financial responsibilities.
- 2 Fear of disappointing family members emerged as one of the strongest sources of psychological stress among adults.
- 3 Excessive family expectations were found to contribute to emotional distress, including stress, anxiety, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy.
- 4 Many participants experienced depressive symptoms such as persistent sadness, loss of motivation, hopelessness, social withdrawal, and low self-worth.
- 5 Conflicts between personal aspirations and family demands frequently resulted in emotional dissatisfaction and identity confusion.
- 6 Participants who perceived family expectations as unrealistic reported higher levels of psychological burden than those who viewed expectations as supportive and achievable.
- 7 Continuous comparison with siblings, relatives, and peers negatively affected self-esteem and self-confidence.
- 8 Family approval was found to be a major determinant of self-worth for many participants.
- 9 Career-related expectations represented the most common source of conflict between adults and their families.
- 10 Marriage-related expectations created substantial emotional pressure, particularly among unmarried participants.
- 11 Financial obligations toward family members were perceived as a major contributor to stress and depressive feelings.
- 12 Emotional support from friends, spouses, and trusted family members helped participants cope with family-related pressures.
- 13 Religious and spiritual practices served as important coping mechanisms for many participants.
- 14 Only a small proportion of participants sought professional psychological counseling despite experiencing depressive symptoms.
- 15 The findings suggest a strong association between perceived family expectations and depression among adults.

Conclusion

The present qualitative study explored the impact of family expectations on depression among adults from an Educational Psychology perspective. The findings reveal that family

expectations significantly influence the emotional well-being and psychological adjustment of adults. While supportive family expectations can motivate individuals and encourage personal growth, excessive, unrealistic, or controlling expectations often create psychological pressure and emotional distress.

The study demonstrates that adults frequently experience stress, anxiety, sadness, and feelings of inadequacy when they perceive themselves as unable to meet family expectations. Expectations regarding career achievement, educational success, marriage, financial stability, and social responsibilities emerged as major sources of pressure. Many participants reported experiencing depressive symptoms resulting from continuous family demands and fear of disappointing significant family members.

The findings further indicate that conflicts between personal aspirations and family expectations contribute to reduced self-esteem, identity confusion, and emotional exhaustion. Such conflicts may hinder psychological well-being and increase vulnerability to depression. The study supports Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), which suggests that discrepancies between actual achievements and expected standards generate negative emotional outcomes. It also aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), emphasizing the importance of autonomy and self-directed decision-making for psychological well-being.

The study concludes that healthy family relationships should be characterized by understanding, emotional support, realistic expectations, and respect for individual aspirations. Educational psychologists, counselors, and mental health professionals should develop interventions that help families establish supportive environments while promoting adult mental health and emotional resilience.

Finally, the study highlights the need for increased mental health awareness, counseling services, and family education programs to reduce the adverse psychological effects of excessive family expectations and foster positive emotional development among adults.

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