



## Comparison of the Dimensions of Emotional Security in Adolescents Based on Family Type Using the Family Process and Content Model

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study is to compare dimensions of emotional security among adolescents, considering various types of family (based on family's process and content model). The statistical sample of this research included 205 girls and 212 boys. Multistage cluster sampling method used to select the sample among guidance schools' junior and senior student of Shiraz city. Two scales served as the measurement instrument, including A) family's process and content and B) security in the family system. Data were analyzed using one way and two way univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA), multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), post Hoc test. The study found that there are significant differences among adolescents various types of family on dimensions of emotional security. In addition, there is a relationship between security and insecurity feeling among adolescents, considering gender among family types. Family types can explain security and insecurity feeling among adolescents and also gender plays an important role in this regard.

**Keywords:** emotional security, the family process and content, adolescents

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### INTRODUCTION

Family, as the first and most important source of growth and training of adolescents, has a significant impact on the behavioral evolution and personality of adolescents. An important factor influencing an individuals' understanding of family processes is emotional security, which refers to sustainability, availability and responsiveness of family members at the time of the occurrence of stressful events (Davies et al., 2005; Cummings et al., 2006). The emotional security theory originates from the family systems theory (Olson, 1999) and Bowlby's theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1969). According to this theory (Davies et al., 1994; Cummings et al., 2006) feeling secure in coping with stress is an important necessity that organizes child's responses. While the theory of attachment emphasizes on the organization of binary relations between a child and the person the child is attached as a means of protecting the sense of security, the family-oriented theory of emotional security has a broader sense that emphasizes on the context of family as a means of protecting the sense of security in children. This theory states that evaluation of insecurity in family by child can add to the risk of the development of psychological problems. There is also empirical information on adolescents that support this assumption (Forman et al., 2005; Cummings et al., 2006).

In fact, emotional security in adolescents is a feeling that is attenuated as a result of threats to the harmony and stability of family relationships. The decrease in this sense leads to problems with

emotional adjustment, negative representation of parental relationships, and maladaptive solutions to parental conflicts (Davies et al., 2002; Goek-Morey et al., 2002). Forman and Davies (2005) discovered three dimensions of the emotional security construct: 1) security; 2) preoccupation; 3) disengagement. Security refers to the trust the child puts in the family, as the source of support and security; Preoccupation refers to the concern of the child for the future and welfare of his family and himself; and disengagement refers to the attempts made by the child to get rid of family conflicts or de-emphasize them. Preoccupation and disengagement are two of the dimensions of the sense of insecurity in family. They are in fact solutions adopted by children to cope with and modify the representations of emotional insecurity in family. These solutions form part of the mechanism of security maintenance (Forman et al., 2005). Signs of the insecurity felt by the children include extreme emotional reactions (such as fear and excitement) and negative internal representations of family (Davies et al., 1998). The energy spent on re-achieving the emotional security ruined by family conflicts can limit physical sources that satisfy evolutionary needs (Davies et al., 2002). Children and adolescents may get sensitive about interpersonal stresses as a result of their ongoing challenges with insecurity. The situation leads to constant emotional and behavioral disorders and negative attitudes toward self and others (Qarehbaqiet al., 2009).

In the course of analyzing the factors influencing the emotional security of children and adolescents, various viewpoints on the contribution of family to the sense of security or insecurity of children have been introduced. Many of the viewpoints have also been investigated through empirical studies. For instance, Davies and Cummings (1998) analyzed the role of family system in the growth of children's pathological problems. Moreover, Emery, Fincham, and Cummings (1992) also introduce parental conflicts as an important threat to the integration of the whole system of family. The results of the study by QarehbaqiandVafai (2009) also indicate that conflicts between parents threaten the family and its integration. In fact, marital conflicts hinder the emotional availability of parents to children and decrease child's trust in family as the source of security. DeRosierandGillion (2007) acknowledged the effects of high solidarity and warm and intimate emotional relationships among family members on the self-esteem, depression, and anxiety of adolescents. Vimpani (2010) also argues that understanding the parental relationships patterns is a very important and major factor influencing the health of children. Although previous researches have provided good information about the effect of family on the emotional health of children, they are involved with many deficiencies. Therefore, there are still many unanswered questions about family, its mechanisms and internal processes. An important question about emotional security of children is: In what types of families each of the dimensions of emotional security,

as a construct, is manifested? In order to answer this question, families should be classified based on some certain criteria and level of emotional security should be evaluated for each class. Various models of family have been developed based on the family systems theory. According to the aforementioned theory, family is a comprehensive entity composed of interrelated components. Therefore, each component affects the other and is affected by them (Klein et al., 1996).

The Contextual Family Process and Content Model (Samani, 2005) is among the models that introduces family as a system. According to this model, families can be classified into four groups based on components including family processes and family content. The groups include: healthy family (efficient family); unhealthy family (inefficient family); problematic family with process problems; and problematic family with contextual problems. The phrase "family processes" in the Contextual Family Process and Content Model refers to functions aiding family members to adjust with new requirements and conditions. These functions include: coping skills, flexibility, problem solving and decision making skills, communication skills and religious orientation. Family content also refers to the possessions and potentials of a family including the income, educational qualifications, and physical and mental health of its members (Samani, 2008). Table 1 shows different types of families classified by the Contextual Family Process and Content Model.

**Table 1.** The four types of families based on the Contextual Family Process and Content Model

Process quality	High	Problematic family with contextual problems	
	Low	Inefficient family	Problematic family with process problems
		Low	High
		Family content quality	

The most important assumption underlying the Contextual Family Process and Content Model is that efficient families (which have the required procedural and contextual potential) basically demonstrate a performance better than that of problematic or inefficient families (Samani, 2008).

According to the contextual family process and content model, different types of families have their specific psychological profile. Only few studies have been conducted with an aim to define the psychological profiles of different family types in the family process and content model based on the emotional characteristics of children. For instance, the result of the research by Samani (2008) showed that efficient families are less involved with emotional problems efficient (such as depression, anxiety, and

stress) compared to other families. Therefore, this research also studied the emotional security of adolescents based on their gender in order to clarify the psychological profiles of different types of families. Hence, the main objective of the present research is to explain different dimensions of emotional security in adolescents based on their gender and the type of families they are brought up in.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The population under study in this research included second grade and third grade guidance school students from four educational zones in Shiraz city (which is a city in south Iran). A total of 417 students were selected as research samples (50.8% female and 49.2% male students) using the multi-

stage cluster sampling method. The sampling phases were in the following order: first, two of the four educational zones were selected and from each of which two girls' guidance schools and two boys guidance schools were randomly selected (a total of 8 schools); second, all of the second grade and third grade students of all of the schools formed the research sample. The following scales were also used for collecting information: security in family system (SIFS), family processes scale, and family content scale.

A) Security in family system (SIFS) scale: This scale was designed for measuring the understanding of 10- to 15-year-old children of the concept of security in family as the system or basis of support and security. This four-point scale includes 22 items ranked from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree). It also contains the following subscales: security subscale (7 items), preoccupation subscale (8 items), and disengagement subscale (7 items). It shall be mentioned that the latter two dimensions lead to emotional security in family and form part of the mechanism of maintaining security (Forman and Davies, 2005). In all of the three scales a higher score reflects a higher level of security, preoccupation or disengagement. In the research by Cummings et al. (2006) the reliability of the Cronbach's alpha coefficients obtained for security, preoccupation, and disengagement were 0.71, 0.77 and 0.84, respectively. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients obtained in this study for preoccupation, disengagement, and security were 0.74, 0.69 and 0.68, respectively.

B) Family processes scale: The self-report family processes scale was designed and developed by Samani in 2008. This five-point Likert scale includes 43 items ranked from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The reliability coefficient obtained using the test and re-test method with a two-week interval was 0.80 and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained for the test was also equal to 0.85. The validity of the construct of the scale was also analyze by Samaini (2002) using the factor analysis method. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale used in this research was also obtained to be 0.93.

C) Family content scale: The self-report family content scale was developed by Samani in 2008 based on the Contextual Family Process and Content Model. This five-point scale includes 38 items ranked from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The reliability coefficients obtained for the scale were 0.78 and 0.79. The validity of the construct of the scale was also assessed by Samaniin 2010. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was calculated to be 0.87 in this research.

In this study, the family process and content self-report scales were used for understanding the

typology of families. Families were classified using the aforementioned two scales as follows: families obtaining scores equal to or higher than 3 from the family content and process scales were classified as efficient families (a profile point of 3 obtained by calculating average scores from family process and content subscales); families obtaining scores equal to 3 from the two scales were classified as inefficient families; families with scores equal to or higher than 3 from the family process scale and scores less than 3 from the family content scale were classified as problems with contextual problems; and finally families with scores less than 3 from the family process scale and scores equal to or more than 3 from the family content scale were classified as problematic families with process problems.

It shall be explained that the three aforementioned scales were answered by all of the participants in the study. Before the sample method answered the scale, the researchers tried to assure that the information provided by them would be confidential and would be used only for research purposes. In addition, the sample group was taught how to answer the questions as well.

## RESULTS

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation values of the dimensions of the security in different families. In order to analyze the differences regarding the dimensions of emotional security among children raised in the four different types of families (efficient, inefficient, problematic with process problems, and problematic with contextual problems) based on their gender a two-factor multivariate analysis of variance was performed.

In addition, to clarify the differences among children regarding the dimensions of emotional security a one-way analysis of variance was performed for the four types of families was performed. Findings of this analysis were also significant for all of the three dimensions (preoccupation:  $P < 0.001$  and  $F = 21.08$ ; disengagement:  $P < 0.001$  and  $F = 35.74$ ; and security:  $P < 0.001$ , and  $F = 35.70$ ). The Tukey post hoc tests were also performed for the final pursuit of differences. Table 4 shows significant findings of the tests performed on the dimensions of emotional security.

## DISCUSSION

As it was mentioned earlier, the most important assumption underlying the family process and content model states that families with adequate levels of contextual and process qualities (efficient families) have more proper psychological functions and results compared to other families. The present study supports this assumption in the sense that efficient

families show a better performance in creating the sense of security in their children. To be exact, children raised in such families enjoy more security

and experience less preoccupation and disengagement.

**Table 2.** The mean and standard deviation values of the dimensions of emotional security in girls and boys based on their gender

Family type	Girls		Boys									
	Preoccupation		Disengagement		Security		Preoccupation		Disengagement		Security	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Efficient</b>	16.42	6.22	12.56	3.95	24.24	2.58	15.96	3.52	12.27	3.38	24.78	2.74
<b>Inefficient</b>	21.64	3.83	18.42	4.16	19.45	4.32	19.34	4.73	15.80	3.74	21.59	3.01
<b>Problematic with process problems</b>	17.66	5.51	15.07	4.50	22.90	3.23	17.63	3.43	15.09	3.27	22.14	2.69
<b>Problematic with contextual problems</b>	20.09	5.72	16.45	2.88	22.32	4.19	18.70	3.90	13.30	3.36	23.27	3.22

**Table 3.** Two-factor multivariate analysis of variance

Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig
preoccupation	Type	1449.103	3	483.034	22.105	0.001
	Gender	88.558	1	88.558	4.05	.04
	Gender*Type	84.05	3	28.01	1.28	NS
	Error	8849.84	405	21.85	-	-
disengagement	Type	1630.583	3	543.528	38.621	0.001
	Gender	186.344	1	186.344	13.24	0.001
	Gender*Type	170.298	3	56.76	4.03	0.008
	Error	5699.67	405	14.07	-	-
Security	Type	1167.701	3	389.234	38.049	0.001
	Gender	42.070	1	42.070	4.11	0.04
	Gender*Type	99.187	3	33.06	3.23	NS
	Error	4143.04	405	10.23	-	-

**Table 4.** Significant findings on the dimensions of emotional security

Variate	Groups	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig	
<b>Preoccupation</b>	Efficient	Inefficient	-4.23	.55	.001
		with contextual problems	-3.08	0.75	.001
	Inefficient	with process problems	2.80	.71	.001
<b>Disengagement</b>	Efficient	Inefficient	-4.62	.43	.001
		with process problems	-2.65	.55	.001
		with contextual problems	-2.21	.59	.001
	Inefficient	with process problems	1.97	.57	.003
		with contextual problems	2.42	.61	.001
<b>Security</b>	Efficient	Inefficient	3.92	.37	.001
		with process problems	2	.47	.001
		with contextual problems	1.62	.50	.009
	Inefficient	with process problems	-1.92	.48	.001
		with contextual problems	-2.30	.52	.001

In efficient families parents are flexible and use parenting methods to communicate properly with their children. Previous studies also approve of this finding. For example, Khooynezhad (2004) indicated that adolescents with parents employing authoritative parenting styles are less lonely than adolescents raised by opinionated and easy going parents. In addition, Samani (2002) proved that solidarity and

unity in family has a considerable effect on the rate of onset of emotional and behavioral problems in adolescents. Children raised in coherent families enjoy adequate emotional and spiritual peace because of the atmosphere dominating their families. Hence, adolescent born in such families feel more secure. On the other hand, because of having great problem solving skills and great potential for decision making

and using coping strategies, they easily solve the problems they face in family and decide on them. Adolescent raised in such families can employ proper coping strategies to confront their problems and add to their feeling of security in handling problems.

In line with this finding, results of studies conducted by the following researchers also indicated that some family characteristics such as warm and kind relationships, unity, emotional intimacy between family members and organization of family play substantial roles in protecting people against stressful life events: Baldwin et al. (1993); Brooks (1994); Werner (1997); Stewart, Reid, and Mangham (1997). In addition, in efficient families contextual qualifications including educational qualification, availability of members, income, can have a direct or indirect positive effect on the interpersonal relations. It can also significantly add to the feeling of security in adolescents. According to the aforementioned characteristics and because of the fact that inefficient families experience poor processes and contents unlike efficient families, children raised in inefficient families show lesser levels of security.

Another finding of the present research is that adolescents raised in problematic families with process and contextual problems (which either have process or contextual problems) feel more secure than adolescents raised in inefficient families (with poor processes and contents). Such adolescents feel more secure and consequently show lower levels of preoccupation and disengagement. However, the difference between families with process problems and families with contextual problems was not significant. In sum, the findings show the importance of both of the dimensions of families (process and content) to the formation of the feeling of security in adolescents.

In the present study, boys raised in efficient families felt more secure than girls in efficient families. A reason underlying this result may be the fact that girls can more easily establish emotional connections with outsiders and their peers. In order to elaborate on the assumption it can be said that adolescent girls can have more emotional relationships with their peers, which leads to the difference between the feeling of security experienced by girls and boys. In the research by Lanz et al. (1999) it was found out that a positive relationship between adolescents and their parents increases their self-confidence. In fact, girls improve their self-confidence by having more emotional connections with their peers. They therefore achieve confidence from outside of family and feel more secure in friendly circles than their families.

Findings about preoccupation, as one of the dimensions of emotional security, indicated that children raised in different types of families show different levels of preoccupation based on their gender. However, there is no significant relationship between children of one gender in different types of families. The characteristics of efficient families could predict the lower score obtained by children raised in such families from the preoccupation test compared to children raised in inefficient and contextually problematic families. The insignificance of the score obtained by children raised in efficient families and families with process problems from the preoccupation test reveals the importance of family content to the popularity of family among adolescents. That is to say, in families with contextual problems the levels of contents (including financial resources, physical appearances, job quality, residence quality,...) is lower than families with process problems (and the poorest forms of communication patterns, parenting styles, problem solving skills, ...) and consequently their children are more preoccupied. However, gender does not contribute to the difference between the levels of preoccupations in children raised in these two types of families. In other words, girls and boys from different types of families show the same levels of preoccupation.

There is no significant difference between families with process problems and families with contextual problems. This finding suggests that regardless of qualification process and content have equal significance under the same conditions and both factors contribute to preoccupation to the same extent.

This finding complies with the findings of the following researchers who have emphasized on the impact of high solidarity and intimacy on the self-confidence, depression and anxiety of adolescents: Novack and Puschner (1999); Hartos and Power (2000); Johnson, Lavoie, and Mahony (2001); Greenwalk (1990); DeRosier and Gillion (2007); Driscoll, Russelly and Crockettz (2008); Vittengle and Holt (1998); Brown (1997); Helesen, Vollebergh and Meeus (2003); Berkeland Constantine (2005).

Nevertheless, the insignificance of the effect of gender on preoccupation of adolescents raised in different families was not expected due to the fact that girls are emotionally stronger than boys. Therefore, girls were expected to express their sense of insecurity through with more emotional signs but the results of the present study showed no different between the expression of insecurity in boys and girls.

Regarding disengagement the results of the present research unsurprisingly showed that adolescents from different types of families show

different levels of disengagement. Besides, it was found out that gender also plays a role in the development of disengagement in adolescents. More precisely, girls from inefficient and problematic families internalize emotional security in the form of disengagement. In sum, the results suggest that boys are more conductive while girls are more emotional.

Based on the results of the present study it can be concluded that improvement of family processes (including communication skills, coping strategies, problem solving and decision making skills, and flexibility) through training and development of family contents (including careers, physical and mental health, educational qualifications, and availability of family members) by providing social services pave the way for the development of emotional security in children.

According to the family process and content model, after assessing the level of security in a family three recommendations can be prescribed for each family. These recommendations are based on the results of pathological tests performed on each family. Prescribed programs for efficient families emphasize on protecting families while programs prescribed for inefficient and problematic families emphasize on the improvement of family processes (through training) and development of family contents (through social services) respectively (Samani, 2005).

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