A Sociopsychological Study on The Sources of Stress Among Adolescents in Developing Countries

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Abstract. Compared with adolescents in developed countries, adolescents in developing countries face more significant and specific pressures, negatively impacting their mental health. Given that nearly 90% of the 1.2 billion young people around the world live in developing countries, it is crucial for researchers to understand the sources of these pressures. This article applies relevant theories and research methods of social psychology to explore the social, cultural, economic, and developmental pressures faced by adolescents in developing countries. Research has shown that poverty, family obligations, educational competition, lack of autonomy, and constantly changing social norms are the primary sources of stress for adolescents in developing countries, significantly affecting their mental health. The social pressure theory, self-determination theory, and cultural adaptation framework provide valuable perspectives for conceptualizing the behavioral and ideological characteristics of adolescents. Based on the previous study, this article will aim to discuss and evaluate the sources providing stress to teenagers in developing countries to help cultivate a healthy next generation.

1 Introduction

Adolescents are currently in adolescence, and the so-called 'adolescence' is a critical developmental period characterized by biological, cognitive, and social transformation [1]. The sources of stress for adolescents vary significantly in different cultural backgrounds. Teenagers in developing countries face a series of unique challenges related to poverty, limited infrastructure, and traditional cultural values, which exacerbate their psychological stress and significantly impact their mental health [2]. Currently, nearly 90% of the 1.2 billion young people worldwide live in low- and middle-income countries - known as "developing countries," which share the common characteristics of intense economic development levels and weak infrastructure [3,4]. A deep understanding of the sources of stress faced by adolescents in these low-resource environments is of great significance for improving their well-being globally. Social psychology provides valuable perspectives for analyzing how broader socio-cultural and economic forces shape the experiences and mental health of adolescents [5]. Different social psychology theories elucidate the mechanisms by which structural weaknesses manifest as psychological distress. In addition, studying adolescents in a developmental environment can also provide information for basic theories by demonstrating how human development unfolds in interactions with different ecological environments [6]. At the same time, resilience studies emphasize that the majority of adolescents in developing countries exhibit healthy adaptive abilities, highlighting the importance of identifying local strengths and protection systems. To be more specific, in social psychology, resilience research refers to the field of exploring an individual's psychological adaptability to adversity and stress. Resilience refers to a person's ability to actively adapt, recover, and grow in the face of pressure, trauma, or adversity [7]. Ultimately, reducing social inequality and structural disadvantages is the most powerful strategy for promoting the healthy growth of young people.

2 The impact of family obligations on the psychological stress of adolescents

Poverty is a prominent problem faced by young people worldwide, with approximately 50% of them growing up in households living on less than $2 a day. However, compared to Western industrialized countries, poverty rates in developing countries concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia are much higher. The economic pressure at the family level can transform into psychological pressure for teenagers themselves. The analysis was conducted using self-determination theory, which is a social psychology theory that aims at explaining the internal driving forces of individuals towards behavioral motivation and autonomy. This theory was proposed by psychologists Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci in the early 1980s, showed that poverty hinders the basic psychological needs of adolescents for autonomy, ability, and relevance, leading them to fall into difficulties. For example, adolescents from impoverished families often lack choices, control over the future, and optimism (autonomy and ability needs), while also facing the problem of being excluded by...
peer norms due to their inability to purchase fashion products (related needs). Quantitative research has found several correlation mechanisms between poverty and mental health, including increased family conflict, reduced parental support, decreased self-esteem, and despair. Such studies indicate that material scarcity has a long-term causal effect on social-emotional function. In developing countries, even in extremely poor communities, relative poverty levels are associated with anxiety and depression, highlighting the importance of subjective social comparison. Some studies have proposed a non-linear connection, where emotional distress increases at both ends of income distribution [8]. Poverty is likely to have different impacts on mental health, depending on the duration of development [9]. The experience of scarcity in early childhood and adolescence may have a significant impact on subsequent functions through the neurobiological embedding of scarcity.

3 The impact of family obligations on the psychological stress of adolescents

The central position of the family in daily life varies from culture to culture, and societies in developing countries generally emphasize filial piety and the close interdependence between generations. Although family relationships are an important source of social support, excessive care obligations can also bring pressure to adolescents undergoing developmental transformation. The theory of social pressure emphasizes that family needs are an important source of stress, especially when family obligations exceed available psychological and social resources. For example, in Mexico, caring for brothers and sisters indicates that girls had higher pain and lower self-esteem, which could possibly be explained by the extra compulsory of sacrificing their time, energy and patience for the younger siblings affected from the family [10]. In Indonesia, family related stress is associated with suicidal tendencies, and despair is a mediating factor. To be more specific, family stress could somehow lead to lower confidence and less satisfaction to life for individuals, due to the mental burden of concerns to continuously endeavor to satisfy their parents. Once they are assumed as not capable of meeting their parents’ requests, the guilty feeling and mental burden could result in some extreme self-destructing decisions. Moreover, In Pakistan, providing funding for families is associated with anxiety in boys and depression in girls. Research in India has found that excessive household chores among adolescents can lead to a decline in academic performance and mental health. However, other studies have shown that when family responsibility is aligned with adolescents' developmental abilities, it can promote their maturity, goals, and self-efficacy. For Filipino teenagers, the time spent on home care and leisure activities have different associations with positive and negative emotions, indicating that the impact of family obligations on adolescent psychological stress is very complex.

4 The impact of educational pressure on adolescent psychological stress

The education systems of developing countries often emphasize college entrance exams, closed classrooms, and strict discipline - although these environments aim to provide skills, structures, and opportunities, they may unintentionally harm the mental health of adolescents. Research has shown that adolescents from different cultural backgrounds describe academic stress as the main source of worry, anxiety, and depression. Experimental and physiological data indicate that exam stress has a causal effect on anxiety and elevated cortisol levels in adolescents, and these biological changes can hinder cognitive performance and learning.

A study conducted by Xiamen University in China investigated the relationship between psychological stress levels and educational stress among 1000 Chinese middle school students. The survey results show that as high as 91.8% of surveyed students feel educational pressure. Meanwhile, research has found that educational pressure is closely related to the psychological pressure of adolescents. In the survey, about 55% of teenagers reported feeling significant psychological pressure in their studies, manifested as psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and insomnia. In addition, the study also found that educational pressure had varying degrees of psychological pressure on adolescents of different genders. Boys are relatively more susceptible to pressure from academic competition, while girls are more susceptible to pressure from appearance and social relationships. This study demonstrates the impact of educational stress on adolescent psychological stress. It demonstrates the universal existence of educational pressure on adolescents and its close relationship with psychological stress. This example highlights the significant impact of educational pressure on the mental health of adolescents and emphasizes the importance of adolescent mental health support and an appropriate educational environment.

The relevant theoretical framework suggests that excessive academic stress can hinder adolescents' core needs for autonomy, ability, and relevance as stipulated in the self-determination theory [11]. When the educational environment provides little self-guidance and strictly sets expectations, the intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, and life satisfaction of adolescents will be lower. The stage environment matching model illustrates how the mismatch between school environment and adolescent development needs can disrupt school connections and exacerbate alienation [12]. To explain, the Person Environment Fit Model is a theoretical framework used to explain the interaction between individuals and their environment [13]. The results indicate that the degree of adaptation and satisfaction of individuals depends on the degree of matching between their personal traits and the environment in social psychology. In developing countries undergoing rapid social changes, the shift towards standardized curriculum and high-risk testing may exacerbate the adversity associated with schools. Policy reforms aimed at expanding educational opportunities often simultaneously increase competition and demand, and their
 pressure can potentially affect individual students. For example, under the rigid examination system in some developing countries, the psychological impact intensifies, stifling the creativity and intrinsic learning goals of adolescents. Therefore, although some academic requirements are necessary stage for teenagers’ growth, excessive pressure can also cause psychological harm to teenagers. Schools bear the important responsibility of cultivating the quality, skills, and social relationships of young people, and are important buffers for them to enter society. Therefore, related partitioners must strive to improve the educational environment and continuously make it meet the development needs of young people.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig 1. Person environment fit model [11]**

5 The impact of insufficient autonomy on the psychological pressure of adolescents

Autonomy refers to a person’s will, self-recognition, and willingness to act based on their intrinsic values and interests. Autonomous development is a key task for adolescents from different cultural backgrounds. However, compared to the individualistic environment in the West, in more traditional developing societies, adolescents often face strict limitations on their autonomy, which greatly affects their psychological-social adaptability. If researchers examine from the perspectives of perceived autonomy and psychological stress levels, they will find a significant negative correlation between the lack of autonomy and the level of psychological stress in adolescents. For example, many adolescents in developing countries may feel a lack of autonomy in making important decisions, scheduling, and self-control. For example, teenagers in developing countries generally face the dilemma of strict restrictions on their learning content and methods, as they are unable to independently choose their own subjects of interest or explore personal preferences.

This lack of autonomy may lead to stress and frustration among teenagers, as they are unable to learn according to their own interests and desires and are forced to pursue academic goals that they may not be interested in or agree with. This fully demonstrates the correlation between a lack of autonomy and anxiety and depression symptoms in adolescents.

In social psychology, self-determination theory is used to explain the mechanisms that link limited autonomy with distress. Frustrated autonomy can inhibit the internalization of intrinsic motivation and pro-social values, resulting in stress, while weakened self-orientation can also impair the ability to respond positively. For example, Chinese teenagers with highly restrictive parents have slower progress in coping skills, which increases the risk of mental health - teenagers may feel powerless and uncontrollable when facing future pressures. The accumulation of psychological stress can lead to physical discomfort, sleep problems, and mental health problems in adolescents, meaning that in the absence of autonomy, adolescents may be more susceptible to the impact of psychological stress. To this end, research must consider autonomy as an important component of adolescent mental health and remind educators and parents to value and support the development of adolescents’ autonomous decision-making and self-control abilities. In addition, in some developing
countries’ collectivist cultures, adolescents often believe that family cohesion is more important than individual freedom, indicating that although autonomy contributes to the healthy growth of adolescents, its optimal level may depend on cultural background and development opportunities.

6 The impact of constantly changing social norms on the psychological stress of adolescents

Adolescents are more sensitive to social and cultural backgrounds, as well as the influence of peers, and begin to be independent of parents who traditionally convey social norms. Therefore, the rapid modernization process in developing countries may bring pressure to adolescents as they need to adapt to constantly changing social norms and lifestyles. For example, there is a significant correlation between adolescents’ understanding of social media norms and changes, and their level of psychological stress. Many adolescents have high expectations for their appearance, figure, and social life, which may lead to anxiety among adolescents. In addition, there is a correlation between the sensitivity of adolescents to changes in social media norms and psychological stress - when they feel unable to adapt to trends and changes on social media, their psychological stress significantly increases. This pressure may stem from concerns of being excluded, ridiculed, or unable to meet the expectations of others, and improper media promotion also has a significant impact in this regard. With the evolution of traditional culture, it is difficult for teenagers in transitional communities to integrate competitive information about dating, sex, educational goals, and gender roles. Many teenagers believe that they need to navigate between more free social norms and traditional parental expectations, which puts them "sandwiched between two worlds". Research has shown that conflicting social norms can lead to psychological stress and cognitive exhaustion among adolescents. The theory of cultural adaptation, which was used as a theoretical framework in social psychology to explain individuals' adaptation and adjustment in cross-cultural environments, suggests that the integration of traditional culture and new cultural exchange is beneficial for physical and mental health, while the alienation of the two can exacerbate pain. It can be seen that the changes in social customs have caused confusion in identity recognition, requiring continuous negotiation between new and old cultures. Research should further investigate the psychological impact of cultural conflicts and determine the conditions that enable the healthy integration of tradition and constantly changing ideals. Deliberate modern cultural rituals can help teenagers build identities that are consistent with the constantly evolving social environment.

7 Conclusion

This article uses social psychology theories and research to elucidate the main sources of stress among adolescents in developing countries. Poverty, family responsibilities, educational pressure, insufficient autonomy, and changes in social and cultural norms are all distinct but interrelated challenges. The accumulation of difficulties in these aspects is likely to damage the social and emotional functions of adolescents in the long term through a synergistic effect. However, resilience studies emphasize that most adolescents exhibit healthy adaptive abilities by actively responding to and utilizing local protection systems. Schools, families, communities, and policy makers all play an essential role in cultivating the ability of young people to face disadvantaged situations. Reducing structural inequality and expanding opportunities for self-determination are powerful strategies to promote their healthy growth. Further research should continue to elucidate specific cultural stressors, buffering, and intervention measures to promote the happiness of our youngest generation.

References