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## A STUDY OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN THE ELDERLY WOMEN ACROSS MARITAL STATUS



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### ABSTRACT

Old age brings along with it a number of challenges. Death of spouse can be especially challenging to older women. Research shows that elderly people who have more social support are more satisfied with their lives in comparison to those elderly who have less social support. Thus people who can identify several close friends or family members with whom they can share their concerns freely, experience higher levels of wellbeing. Subjective well-being refers to people's evaluations of their lives -- evaluations that are both affective and cognitive. The current research aimed to study social support and subjective well-being in the elderly married and widowed women. Social support was measured using Interpersonal Support Evaluation List by Cohen & Hoberman. Subjective well being was measured using SWLS scale by Ed Diener. A sample of 40 elderly women was studied of which 20 were married and 20 were widowed. Pearson r coefficient of correlation was computed and it revealed a significant positive correlation between social support and subjective well-being in elderly women. A t test was computed and it revealed that there is no significant difference in the means of social support and subjective well-being in elderly women across their marital status.



Old age brings along with it a number of challenges. Death of spouse can be especially challenging to older women. Research shows that elderly people who have more social support are more satisfied with their lives in comparison to those elderly who have less social support. Thus people who can identify several close friends or family members with whom they can share their concerns freely, experience higher levels of wellbeing. Subjective well-being refers to people's evaluations of their lives -- evaluations that are both affective and cognitive. The current research aimed to study social support and subjective well-being in the elderly married and widowed women. Social support was measured using Interpersonal Support Evaluation List by Cohen & Hoberman. Subjective well being was measured using SWLS scale by Ed Diener. A sample of 40 elderly women was studied of which 20 were married and 20 were widowed. Pearson r coefficient of correlation was computed and it revealed a significant positive correlation between social support and subjective well-being in elderly women. A t test was computed and it revealed that there is no significant difference in the means of social support and subjective well-being in elderly women across their marital status.

**KEYWORDS** : *social support, subjective well-being, elderly women.*

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT:

Happiness and contentment are most valued in the old age when people take an account of their lives. People base the evaluation of their life on positive and negative experiences they have had. Culture also determines this evaluation by stating certain standards of behaviour from self and others. Social support refers to support provided by family and friends. This social support is an expected behaviour of one's offspring. In this research, the relation between social support and subjective well-being has been studied and a comparison has been made across marital status of the elderly women i.e. married and widowed.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be” – Abraham Lincoln Happiness is a state of mind that determines feelings of well-being. Self report of how well life is going came to be known as subjective well-being (commonly abbreviated as SWB). It is important to note here that it is not the same as happiness (Hoorn, 2007).

Subjective well-being refers to people's evaluations of their lives -- evaluations that are both affective and cognitive. The affective part is a hedonic evaluation guided by emotions and feelings, while the cognitive part is an information-based appraisal of one's life for which people judge the extent to which their life so far measures up to their expectations and resembles their envisioned 'ideal' life. A number of studies have stated that most people report a positive level of SWB (Gunn, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Andrews & Withey, 1976).

SWB responses measured across nations were found to be overall positive. However, Veenhoven (1993) found that only in two countries, i.e. India and Dominican Republic the mean report fell below the neutral point of the SWB scale. A number of factors can explain this finding. People in collectivistic societies are more likely to sacrifice their personal happiness to do their duty (Deiner, 2000). Also SWB correlates substantially with income (Diener et al. 1995). Biswas-Diener & Diener (2001) found a strong correlation between income and life satisfaction in respondents living in the slums of Calcutta. This relation however is not seen in economically developed nations (Veenhoven, 1991).

As people age they spend less time with others and do so selectively. Older people prefer to spend time more with others they know well than trying to get to know others. Nevertheless, quality of social support does not decline (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2004).

Social support is information and feedback from others that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and included in a network of communication and mutual obligation. Social support has three types of benefits (Taylor, 2003):

**Tangible assistance:** family and friends can provide actual goods and services in stressful circumstances.

**Information:** recommend specific actions and plans to help the person under stress to cope effectively.

**Emotional support:** provide care and love to the person under stress.

Having diverse social ties is especially important in coping with stress (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Vogt and others, 1992). Pinquart and Sorenson (2000) in meta-analysis of studies found that contact with friends has greater influence on SWB than contact with relatives. However, relationships with adult children appear to play a larger role in wellbeing than relationships with friends. Collectivist societies provide greater social support in troubled times (Deiner, 2000). Friendships in old age revolve around companionship and providing support. Older people who have close friends with whom they can share their worries and pain, deal better with changes and crisis of aging. Friends can help fill up the gap created by loss of spouse. Those who receive high levels of emotional and practical support from friends are less likely to be lonely (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2004).

Diener et al., (1998) found that married couples were happier than non-married couples, especially in collectivist cultures such as India. Empirical research shows that a very happy individual is likely to be a happily married, has an active social life with a network of good social support (Myers,

2000; Diener & Seligman, 2002). Gender and age in particular are robust determinants of SWB across samples. Generally, women report higher SWB scores than men do, and SWB is U-shaped with age: SWB is higher among young people, declines in middle age cohorts and increases again at older age (Hoorn, 2007).

### 1.2 Objectives:

1. To study the correlation between social support and subjective well-being of elderly women.
2. To compare subjective well-being of married and widowed women.
3. To compare social support experienced by married and widowed women.

### 1.3 Hypotheses:

- Ha1. There will be a significant positive correlation between social support and subjective well-being of elderly women.
- Ha2. There will be a significant difference in the subjective well-being of married and widowed women.
- Ha3. There will be a significant difference in the social support experienced by married and widowed women.

## 2. METHODOLOGY:

2.1 Research Design: This is an Exploratory Design

2.2 Sample Design: Purposive sampling – sample consisted of 40 elderly women in the age range of 60 to 80 years residing in Margao, Goa. Of these 20 were married and 20 were widows.

Exclusion criteria: elderly women undergoing treatment for serious illness; and institutionalized elderly.

2.3 Method of data collection: Two questionnaires measuring social support and subjective well-being were administered on 40 elderly women – 20 married and 20 widowed.

### 2.4 Research tools:

Social Support was measured using the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List by Cohen & Hoberman. This is a 12-item measure of perceptions of social support. This measure is a shortened version of the original ISEL (40 items; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). This questionnaire has three different subscales designed to measure three dimensions of perceived social support.

These dimensions are:

- 1.) Appraisal Support
- 2.) Belonging Support
- 3.) Tangible Support

Each dimension is measured by 4 items on a 4-point scale ranging from “Definitely True” to “Definitely False”.

Subjective Well-being was measured using Satisfaction with Life Scale by Ed Diener, Robert A. Emmons, Randy J. Larsen and Sharon Griffin (1985).

SWLS measures global life satisfaction and the items in it are completed on a seven-point Likert

scale with a response range consisting of 1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree. This measure has been found to have favourable psychometric properties. Numerous research studies found acceptable content and criterion related validity. The internal consistency of the scale is good with coefficients of 0.8 and more.

**2.5 Statistical Tools:** Pearson's product moment coefficient of correlation was computed to study the relationship between Social Support and SWB.

Independent groups t test was computed to compare SWB of married and widowed women.

Independent groups t test was computed to compare social support of married and widowed women.

### 3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

In order to study the correlation between Social Support and Subjective well-being, Pearson's product moment coefficient of correlation was computed (table 1.1). From this we understand that there is a significant positive correlation ( $r=.499$   $p<0.001$ ) between SWB and Social Support in elderly women. This means higher the social support higher will be the SWB. Thus the hypothesis stating that there will be a significant positive correlation between social support and subjective well-being of elderly women is proved.

Collectivist societies provide greater social support in troubled times (Deiner, 2000). Also the age old guidance given to people is to be happy or satisfied with what one has. The majority of elderly people report more positive than negative aspects of their social relationships. With increasing frequency of contacts, people receive more positive appraisals and support from these relations, which, in turn, is associated with SWB (Pinquart & Sorenson 2000). Further, widowhood makes women more vulnerable to deficits in the social network.

To study the significance of difference between the means of subjective well-being in elderly women across marital status i.e. married and widowed, a t test was computed (table 1.2). It is seen that the difference in the means of SWB of married and widowed elderly women is not significant ( $p>.05$ ). Thus the hypothesis stating that there will be a significant difference in the subjective well-being of married and widowed women is disproved.

A number of studies reveal that despite setbacks in life (from injury to disability) people report positive well-being (Diener & Diener, 1996). Though life circumstances may bring negative emotions to the forefront for a while, eventually people return to the neutral state, indicating adaptation to the situation. This may explain the findings in the current research. Another possibility is that Indian women are likely to stay in an unhappy marriage, accepting it as their destiny.

To study the significance of difference between the means of social support experienced by elderly women across marital status i.e. married and widowed, a t test was computed (table 1.3). The findings indicate that the difference in the means of social support of married and widowed elderly women is not significant ( $p>.05$ ). Thus the hypothesis stating that there will be a significant difference in the social support experienced by married and widowed women is disproved.

Though the social scenario of extended joint family system is fading, elderly parents continue to be looked after by children. Most married women reported having support from their husband. However, widowed women reported receiving the support from their children.

### 5.CONCLUSION:

The study has revealed two important findings with regard to social support and SWB in elderly

women across marital status.

It is seen that there is a significant positive correlation between social support and SWB of elderly women across their marital status.

The second finding is that there is no significant difference in the means of social support and SWB in married and widowed women.

#### 6. LIMITATIONS:

The study was conducted on a small sample of elderly women living with their offspring.

The study can be extended to women living alone as also a comparison can be made across gender.

#### 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

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Table no 1.1 Correlation between Social Support and SWB

| Variable | Social Support |
|----------|----------------|
| SWB      | .499**         |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1.2 Indicating t value for SWB of married and widowed elderly women

| Variables | Groups  | N  | Mean  | SD    | t value |
|-----------|---------|----|-------|-------|---------|
| SWB       | Married | 20 | 51.09 | 10.15 | .683    |
|           | Widowed | 20 | 48.92 | 09.99 |         |

p>0.05: not significant

Table 1.3 Indicating t value for social support experienced by married and unmarried women

| Variables      | Groups  | N  | Mean  | SD    | t value |
|----------------|---------|----|-------|-------|---------|
| Social support | Married | 20 | 49.12 | 10.49 | -.555   |
|                | Widowed | 20 | 50.90 | 09.66 |         |

p>0.05: not significant



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