

Parental Reflective Functioning, Life Satisfaction and Sense of Community among Parents

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Abstract

Parental reflective function is a vital mental ability of a parent which has great impact on effective parenting and positive child development. The present study aims to examine the correlation of Parental reflective function with life satisfaction and sense of community, and to ascertain the effects of level of education, type of family and gender on Parental reflective function. A total of 302 participants (151 Fathers and 151 Mothers) belonging to different Naga tribes of Nagaland participated using convenience sampling method. Parental reflective functioning questionnaire, Satisfaction with Life Scale and Sense of Community Scale were used for the study. Majority of the parents scored low to average categories on Pre mentalizing modes, indicative of adaptive reflective functioning. In the Interest and curiosity in mental states dimension, majority of the participants showed hypermentalization indicative of excessive desire and intend to know everything about the child's mental states that can be intrusive and hence maladaptive. Result showed Pre mentalizing modes dimension had significant relationship with life satisfaction where, as life satisfaction increases, there was an increase in mentalization ability among parents. ANOVA showed a significant effect of education on pre mentalizing modes, where parents having higher level of education were able to well recognize the mental states of their children. Parents living in nuclear families showed significantly lower levels of pre mentalizing modes which denotes relatively more adaptive mentalization. The present study did not find any significant difference between fathers and mothers in parental reflective function.

Keywords: Parental Reflective Functioning, Mentalization, Life Satisfaction, Sense of Community

Parental Reflective Functioning (PRF) is the ability of parents to grasp and comprehend the inner mental states of their child and also their own mental states for effective parenting. It is also termed as mentalization wherein the capacity to grasp the mental states in terms of intentions and feelings contributes to the predictive ability of each other's actions (Fonagy & Target, 1998). Parenting behaviour, like attachment behaviour is to some extent pre-determined (Bowlby, 1988) and though every child has the capacity to mentalize by birth, it is the environment which gives the chance to eventually develop the mentalizing capacity (Fonagy et al. 2002). The act of sensitive caregiving by parents in gestures, play and words helps the child to develop mentalizing capacities (Slade, 2005). On the other hand, if parents fail to identify that the child has its own inner experience and unable to respond accordingly, the child is deprived of developing a viable sense of self (Fonagy, 2001). The inability of the caregivers to understand infant's feelings and mental states in terms of psychological unavailability (Baron-Cohen, 1995), failure to engage in imaginative activity and hypervigilance about mental states (Allen et al., 2008), impaired attachment (Fonagy et al., 2009) can all lead to failure in developing mentalizing capacity in the child. In such instances,

development of several psychopathology due to maladaptive attachment has been reported such as low peer relations, aggression, depression, higher tendency and rate of divorce, increased adolescent dissociative symptoms and increase in psychiatric morbidity (Belsky, 1997; Fonagy, 2001; Obsuth et al, 2014). However, attachment security is seen to be a great protective factor against psychopathology (Fonagy, 2001) and the understanding of inner-self creates a foundation of mentalization, which helps discover the crucial aspects of subjective experience and it help allows for self-knowledge and self-exploration that leads to growth of self and affect regulation (Slade, 2005).

Mentalizing capacity is also seen as an important factor for an individual to function socially (MacIntosh, 2013) and healthy relationships during initial years of one's life contributes to overall human psychological development (Bowlby, 1988). Lopez (2009) also reported a strong link and interdependence between attachment security and close social competencies that embraces positive parenting. Such conditions help an individual to handle life stresses and perform parenting role and manage intergenerational ties more efficiently.

Method

PRF is an important area of research for both parents and children. The parents' ability to

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mentalize and creating a suitable environment for the child to mentalize is seen as an ultimate goal in parenting when if achieved is assured of flourishing mental health both for parents and their children. The purpose of the current research is to explore the level of Parental Reflective Functioning among Naga parents so as to understand the status of parent-child relationship, an area which has not been explored among Naga parents thus far. The goal is to explore the components of Parental Reflective Functioning, in terms of non-mentalizing stance where parents fail to understand the mental states of their child; the level of certainty among parents on their child's mental states; and the level of interest and curiosity in their child mental states. Researches have validated the importance of Parental Reflective Functioning with development of attachment patterns, psychiatric illnesses, and intergenerational transmission of attachment. The findings of the present study in respect of maladaptive parenting can also serve as an important indicator for planning effective interventions for more effective parental reflective functioning among Naga parents. The study also explores the level of association between satisfaction with life and parental reflective functioning among Naga parents as the literature supports the stance that the perception of life satisfaction has impact on parenting and parent-infant relationship. In the present scenario where most parents of younger generation try to cope with demands of both work and family, levels of life satisfaction are seen to be an important factor influencing Parental Reflective Functioning. This research also aims to explore to what extent the sense of community influences the perception among parents in the understanding of their child mental states and further to understand the effects of level of education, type of family and gender of parents. Thus, the present study aims to explore objectives i.e. to examine the relationship of the various dimensions of PRF with life satisfaction and sense of community among Naga parents and to examine the effects of education, type of family and gender on the various dimensions of PRF among Naga parents. The hypotheses are, there would be a significant relationship between parental reflective function and life satisfaction among Naga parents, there would be a significant relationship between parental reflective function and sense of community among Naga parents and there would be a significant difference in parental reflective function across level of

Education, type of family and gender of Naga parents

Participants and procedure

A total of 302 participants (151 Fathers and 151 Mothers) belonging to different Naga tribes of Nagaland who were well versed in English language were approached using convenience sampling method. Data was collected from couples residing in all the districts of Nagaland. The sample included parents who have biological children between age group 0-5 years. Parents who have children above 5 years of age, parents who have children with diagnosis of developmental/emotional/behavioral or neurological problems and physical handicaps, and parents who have adopted children were excluded from the study. A cordial rapport was built with all the participants and the purpose of the study was explained before giving them the questionnaire.

The proposal of the current study has been permitted by the Departmental Ethics Committee, Department of Psychology, Nagaland University, India. Voluntary participation and confidentiality were emphasized. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

Measures

Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ: Luyten, Mayes, Nijssens & Fonagy, 2017) was used for the study. It consists of 18 statements that are scored on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 - *strongly disagree* to 7 - *strongly agree*. PRFQ has three subscales, i) *Pre-Mentalizing Modes* (PM) which has items that reflect a pre-mentalizing or non-mentalizing stance. Higher scores on PM indicates an inability to enter the subjective world of the child; ii) *Certainty about Mental States* (CM) assess parent's certainty about their child's mental states. Over-certainty imply intrusive hypermentalizing while under-certainty implies lack of awareness; and iii) *Interest and Curiosity in Mental States* (IC) has items that reflect parent's interest and curiosity about the child's mental states. Low levels reflect an absence of interest in the child's mental states while very high score might reflect hyper mentalizing. Middle scores on CM and IC subscales represent adaptive reflective functioning, whereas extreme scores are considered maladaptive. In the present sample, the PRFQ internal consistency across subscales are PM ($\alpha = 0.59$), CM ($\alpha = 0.65$), and IC ($\alpha = 0.56$).

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS: Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). It is a short 5-item instrument designed to measure global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one's life. The internal consistency for the present study sample is ($\alpha = 0.56$).

Sense of Community Scale (SOC) (Greenfield & Marks, 2010) It is a short 3-item instrument designed to measure one's sense of community. Cronbach's alpha was noted to be 0.73. The internal consistency for the current study sample is ($\alpha = 0.41$).

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics such as Pearson Chi-square, Pearson's correlation and ANOVA were used.

Results

A Chi-Square test of independence showed a significant association between the PM

lower PRF. Therefore, it can be interpreted that life satisfaction is positively related with PRF.

No significant associations were observed between sense of community and any of the components of PRF, PM - $\chi^2(2, N = 302) = 1.902, p = 0.386$; CM- $\chi^2(1, N = 302) = 2.167, p = 0.141$; IC- $\chi^2(1, N = 302) = 1.619, p = 0.203$.

ANOVA revealed a significant effect of education on the PM component of PRF, $F(1, 294) = 5.60, p = 0.02$. Undergraduate parents scored higher PM scores ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.11$) than the graduate parents ($M = 2.87, SD = 1.06$) indicating lesser adaptive PRF among the lesser educated parents.

A significant effect of type of family on PM was also observed, $F(1, 294) = 6.06, p = 0.01$. Parents living with extended family scored higher PM scores ($M = 3.44, SD = 1.08$) than parents living in nuclear family ($M = 2.95, SD = 1.09$) indicating

Table 1. Sample distribution by demographic characteristics

Demographic variables	Fathers (Male)	Mothers (Female)	Total
	n= 151 (50%)	n=151 (50%)	
Educational qualification			
Graduate	103 (68.2%)	86 (57%)	189 (62.6%)
Undergraduate	48 (31.8%)	65 (43%)	113 (37.4%)
Type of Family			
Nuclear	126 (83.4%)	126 (83.4%)	252 (83.4%)
Extended	25 (16.6%)	25 (16.6%)	50 (16.6%)
Age			
20-29 years	35 (23.2%)	30 (19.9%)	65 (21.5%)
30-39 years	93 (61.5%)	101 (66.9%)	194 (64.2%)
40-49 years	22 (14.6%)	20 (13.2%)	42 (14%)
50-59 years	1 (0.7%)	0	1 (0.3%)
Employment			
Government Employee	66 (43.7%)	79 (52.3%)	145 (48%)
Private business	31 (20.5%)	28 (18.5%)	59 (19.5%)
Housewife/Unemployed	38 (25.2%)	35 (23.2%)	73 (24.2%)
Private company employee	16 (10.6%)	9 (6%)	25 (8.3%)

component of PRF and life satisfaction- $\chi^2(10, N = 302) = 22.178, p = 0.014$. No significant associations were observed between the CM component of PRF and life satisfaction- $\chi^2(5, N = 302) = 3.556, p = 0.615$ or between the IC component of PRF and life satisfaction- $\chi^2(5, N = 302) = 10.521, p = 0.062$.

In further analyzing life satisfaction with PM, it is seen to be negatively correlated to PM, Pearson's $r(302) = -0.26, p < 0.01$. In the interpretation of PM score, lower score is reflective of higher PRF and higher score reflect

lesser adaptive PRF among the extended family parents. Gender effect on PM was not found to be significant, $F(1, 294) = 1.53, p = 0.207$. Fathers ($M = 3.14, SD = 1.09$) and Mothers ($M = 2.92, SD = 1.10$) did not differ significantly in their PM scores.

On the CM component of PRF, there was no significant effect of education, $F(1, 300) = 1.59, p = 0.208$. Graduate ($M = 4.04, SD = 1.06$) and undergraduate ($M = 4.19, SD = 0.99$) parents did not differ significantly in their CM scores. A significant effect of type of family on CM was observed, $F(1, 300) = 4.80, p = 0.03$. Extended

family parents scored higher CM scores ($M=4.39$, $SD=0.94$) as compared to nuclear family parents ($M=4.04$, $SD=1.04$) although both

show active attention and inquisitiveness in child's mental state.

In the present study, only a small percentage of

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of observations on PRF level

PRF	Level	TOTAL sample	Fathers	Mothers	Graduates	Under graduates	Nuclear family	Extended family
	High	10(3.3%)	0	5(3.3%)	7(3.7%)	3(2.7%)	6(2.4%)	4(8%)
	Average	64.2%	57.6%	59%	64%	64.6%	65.9%	56%
PM	Low	32.5%	42.4%	37.7%	32.3%	32.7%	31.7%	36%
	High	11%	2%	11.3%	11.1%	10.6%	9.5%	18%
	Average	82%	84.1%	81.5%	81.5%	83.2%	83.7%	74%
CM	Low	7%	13.9%	7.2%	7.4%	6.2%	6.8%	8%
	High	65.2%	37.7%	70%	63.5%	68.1%	65.9%	62%
IC	Average	34.8%	62.3%	30%	36.5%	31.9%	34.1%	38%
	Low	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

groups' CM scores are on the average range indicating adaptive PRF. The gender effect on CM was also not significant, $F(1, 300) = 0.006$, $p=0.937$. Fathers ($M=4.09$, $SD=0.98$) and mothers ($M=4.10$, $SD=1.09$) did not differ significantly in their CM scores.

On the IC component, there was no significant effect of education qualification, $F(1, 300) = 0.000$, $p=0.993$. Graduates ($M=5.62$, $SD=0.80$) and undergraduates ($M=5.63$, $SD=0.91$) did not differ significantly in their IC scores. A significant effect of type of family on IC was observed $F(1, 97.35) = 4.42$, $p=0.04$. Extended family parents ($M=5.80$, $SD=0.59$) showed higher IC scores than parents from nuclear families ($M=5.59$, $SD=0.88$). No significant effect of gender on IC was observed $F(1, 300) = 1.89$, $p=0.170$. Fathers ($M=5.55$, $SD=0.88$) and mothers ($M=5.69$, $SD=0.79$) did not differ significantly in their IC scores.

Discussion

Reflective function among Naga parents was studied by examining three different dimensions of PRF i.e. Non- mentalizing which is distinctive of parents with damages in PRF, ability to recognize the opacity of mental states, additionally interest and curiosity in child's mental states. Luyten et al. (2017) noted that adaptive PRF can be observed in parents who are mindful of the child's mental state, accept the opacity of the mental state in their children and

parents scored high on PM subscale. Scoring high on statements like- *My child cries around strangers to embarrass me; I find it hard to actively participate in make believe play with my child; My child sometimes gets sick to keep me from doing what I want to do* – implies poor mentalizing signifying the parents' inability to be mindful of the child's mental state and to relate mentally to the child. Since majority of the parents in the present study fall in the low to average categories on PM, it is indicative of adaptive reflective functioning amongst majority of the participants. In the CM component also, majority showed adaptive reflective functioning. A notable percentage (18%), however, showed either over certainty (11%) or under certainty (7%) of their child's mental state. While over-certainty implies failure in recognizing the opacity of mental states, under-certainty indicates very little certainty or no certainty about the child's mental states and both states denote maladaptive PRF. In the IC component, majority of the participants showed hypermentalization indicating an excessive desire and intend to identify all about the child's mental states which can be intrusive and hence maladaptive. Research supports that parents who are not aware of their own mental states are the ones who also are likely to display decreased awareness of their child's mental states (Schultheis et al., 2019). Attachment avoidance, parenting stress,

psychological unavailability on the part of attachment figures, etc. are all factors that can be associated with maladaptive PRF such as pre-mentalizing and hyper/hypo mentalization (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Fonagy et al., 1991; Nijssens et al., 2018), which can also be a factor in present study for maladaptive mentalization.

Result showed only PM component had significant relationship with life satisfaction indicating that Naga parents who reported higher pre-mentalizing modes, which is maladaptive, had lower life satisfaction. While there are no existing studies that have examined the relationship between PRF and general life satisfaction, there are studies that suggest that certain factors that can contribute to life satisfaction, for example, quality of marital relationship (Luyten et al., 2017) and satisfaction with one's parenting role (Rostad and Whitaker, 2016), are associated with lower non-mentalizing. Psychological and physically unavailability on the part of parents had been identified as a factor that contributes to their failure to mentalize one's child's mental states (Baron-Cohen, 1995), and it is possible that parents who are not functioning and feeling well in their relationships or in their role as parents may have lower life satisfaction. Such parents may have the tendency to be psychologically and physically unavailable to their children too thus leaving them in a state where they are not able to mentalize.

Additionally, Sense of community is an important concept that aims to capture collective value such as attachment that exists among people (Davidson & Cotter, 1986). It has been reportedly found to enhance one's participation in the community thus enabling promotion of social support and wellbeing which are further correlated with subjective well-being and life satisfaction (Cicognani et al., 2009; Coulombe & Krzesni., 2019; Gattino et al., 2013; Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2013; Prezza et al., 2001;). The present study explored whether or not there was any association between PRF and sense of community. Sense of community reported by the parents was not found to be significantly associated with any of the components of PRF in the present study.

Further, ANOVA showed a significant effect of education on PM component of PRF but not on the CM and IC components. Parents with lower levels of education (undergraduate) had higher PM as compared to parents with higher levels of education (graduate and above). The findings

indicate that parents with lower level of education exhibited a more non-mentalizing stance i.e. inability to understand the child's mental states and is consistent with findings in a similar other study by Luyten et al. (2017). Receiving higher level of education thus seems to be helpful in understanding one's child's mental states. As research supports that acquiring a proper education enables a person to acquire more general knowledge which can further help in enhancing reasoning and judgment thus enabling the individual to better cope with various challenges in life (Nwoke, 2008).

Parents living in nuclear families and parents living in extended families were compared in terms of PM, CM and IC components of PRF. Parents living in nuclear families showed significantly lower levels of PM which denotes lesser non-mentalizing and so relatively more adaptive PRF. On CM and IC also, nuclear family parents displayed better PRF. The nuclear family has long been considered as the basic and primary social unit of mankind (Bowlby, 1969). In a nuclear family environment, the ultimate caregiving for children lies solely upon the mother and father, unlike in extended families where the responsibilities are diffused as other member are also available for caregiving. As such parents in nuclear families have more opportunities to bond and spend time with child as compared to those in the extended families. Perhaps this is why parent-child relation is reported to be better in nuclear families than in extended families (Bansal et al. 2014) and this could also explain the better mentalizing capacity among parents in nuclear families as observed in the present study. The present finding is suggestive that nuclear family may be more favorable for parent-child relationships particularly for developing more adaptive reflective functioning as parents.

Further, Mothers and fathers were compared in their reflective functioning as parents. The present study did not find any substantial alteration between mothers and fathers in PRF. A couple of existing studies have given mixed results, Esbjorn et al. (2013) had reported higher levels of reflective functioning among mothers as compared to fathers while Pazzagli et al. (2018) reported that mothers had advanced levels of interest and curiosity (hypermentalizing) in children's mental states as compared to fathers.

The present sample was moderately similar including mainly of socio-economically advantaged participants who were married

couples all living in district headquarters in which a higher occurrence of secure attachment, life satisfaction and sense of community is sensible to assume. Congruently, results revealed that many participant parents had scores in the normal (non-clinical) range on the present study variables. However, even within this moderately well-functioning group, the disturbances in Parental Reflective Functioning could be found with Pre-Mentalizing Modes (PM) as a delicate indicator. Additionally, parents scoring high on Pre-Mentalizing Modes (PM) were seen to be less satisfied with life. Further, findings of Parental Reflective Functioning particularly PM should be addressed for prevention of maladaptive functioning and intervention programs among the Naga parents

Conclusion

There are limited studies on PRF in India and literally none in the Naga context. Studies on relationship of PRF with demographic variables are limited and no study, to the best of our knowledge, had examined its relationship with life satisfaction and sense of community. Although done on a limited sample size using self-report measures that may be subject to social desirability biases, the present study has added important contributions to the existing body of knowledge in understanding PRF. Majority of the parents in the present study showed adaptive reflective functioning, however large number of participants also showed hypermentalization indicating an excessive desire and intend to know everything about the child's mental states which can be intrusive and hence maladaptive. Result also showed that as life satisfaction increases, there was an increase in mentalization ability among parents and parents who have higher level of education were able to better understand the mental states of their children compared to undergraduate parents. Parents living in nuclear families also denotes relatively more adaptive mentalization. The present study did not find any significant difference between mothers and fathers in parental reflective function. The study is also a preliminary attempt to understand reflective functioning among Naga parents and has provided important insights into its relationships with psycho-social variables which can be used as the ground work for future research work in the area.

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