

EXHAUSTION IN PARENTAL BURNOUT AND WELLBEING: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SELF-DISCREPANCY AMONG URBAN INDIAN MOTHERS

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood is perceived as a significant role for a woman. However, it can also be stressful and exhausting when there is a lack of resources for meeting the demands of parenting. This would lead to parental burnout, which can result in perceiving oneself as not a good parent, causing greater self-discrepancy and affecting the overall wellbeing. This study aims to study the relationship between the emotional exhaustion faced in parenting, self-discrepancy and wellbeing. Data was collected from 408 mothers in the schools of Chennai. Proposed mediation model was analyzed using Hayes PROCESS macro in SPSS and the results revealed that self-discrepancy partially mediated the effect of parental exhaustion on wellbeing ($a*b = CI_{95} = -0.06$ and -0.01). The findings suggest that in the protocol for treating parental burnout, if mothers are taught to set rational expectations in their role as a mother, it would help them to improve their wellbeing.

Keywords: Parental burnout, Exhaustion, parental wellbeing, maternal self discrepancy

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INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is an important milestone in every woman's life. It is a wonderful journey that fills them with a sense of pride and fulfillment as they watch their child grow. But in the process of parenting, the wellbeing of the mother is often overlooked, as motherhood is often considered synonymously to sacrifice. Women juggle between many roles in their personal and professional life, as a parent, partner, employee, and each of these roles are influenced by their attitudes and belief (Shiraz, 2022). It is not uncommon to find mothers believing that they are not good enough in their parenting role. Though fathers are also involved in parenting, the share of responsibility is mostly unequal. With the disproportionate burden placed on mothers in parenting, there is a higher toll on mother's wellbeing (Mazumdar et al., 2021). Sharon Hays who introduced the concept of intensive parenting also describes about the 'guilt

gap' that is more commonly experienced by mothers than the fathers though both are equally responsible for childcare (Hays S, 1996). Hence, we chose to study the population of mothers in the aspect of their parental burnout related exhaustion and its effect on maternal self-discrepancy and wellbeing.

Maternal Self discrepancy and wellbeing

Self discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) proposes that degree of discrepancy between actual and ideal self is related to mental health aspects. This suggests that women experience maternal guilt and shame when a discrepancy is experienced between their actual sense of self and their ideal sense of who they think they should be as a mother. (Liss et al., 2013) Apart from the self-ingrained mothering ideals, mothers are also constantly judged by the society and to avoid being looked down in their role as a parent, they set up unrealistically high expectations on themselves. Therefore, women tend

to be more and more involved in their parenting role, compromising their other social roles, which lead to mismanagement of social identities.

Mothers who experience growing discrepancies between their actual self and mothering ideals are exhausted with poor wellbeing and feelings of failure and guilt (Batram-Zantvoort et al., 2022). Research evidences suggest that maternal guilt is a commonly observed phenomena and if it persists over a long time, it can lead to a sense of ineffectiveness which in turn impact the wellbeing and mental health (Sutherland, 2010). It is also observed that self-discrepancy creates more inter role conflict that negatively affects the coping effectiveness; can lead to guilt, shame among mothers and can also lead to various negative affective state viz., anxiety, depression, guilt and shame (Batram-Zantvoort et al., 2022; Liss et al., 2013; Ozgul et al., 2003). Prior studies on wellbeing also indicate a negative association between self-discrepancy and subjective wellbeing (Lynch et al., 2009; Seo et al., 2014). Hence, we expect to obtain the same relationship between discrepancy and wellbeing among participant mothers.

Exhaustion in Parental burnout

Parental burnout results from chronic imbalance of parenting demands over existing resources and is a state of intense exhaustion related to the parental role (Mikolajczak et al., 2019). Emotional exhaustion is the first and main symptom of parental burnout where the mothers experience extreme fatigue in their parenting role and it requires a great deal of effort for even day-to-day parenting tasks (Gillis & Roskam, 2020).

According to the two factor theory of perfectionism, perfectionistic concerns include concerns about making mistakes and feelings of discrepancy between one's standards and performance along with fear of negative evaluation by others when the perfectionism standard is not achieved (Stoeber et al., 2006). Perfectionism beliefs also reduce the mother's willingness to seek social support. Research evidence shows that, this perfectionistic concern which is positively related to parental burnout would increase maternal self discrepancy (Kawamoto et al., 2018).

According to the Risk and Resource theory (Roskam et al., 2018), parenting related exhaustion results from prolonged exposure to stress related to parenting and when the resources available to meet the demands are insufficient. Hence exhaustion is not just equivalent to day-to-day hassles in parenting, but it is parenting stress in excessive quantity and also for a longer period of time, that would make parents feel that they are not good enough as a parent anymore, which affect maternal self-perception. Parenting related exhaustion over a long period of time will lead to other negative mental health outcomes like escape ideation such as running away or committing suicide. It is also highly associated with neglectful and violent behaviors towards children (Mikolajczak et al., 2019).

Current Study

In summary, it was found that there are no studies so far, where the relationship between the maternal self-discrepancy, parental exhaustion and wellbeing has been explored. The literature review has also revealed that parental exhaustion has impact on both self discrepancy and wellbeing, while self discrepancy alone could also impact the wellbeing. Hence, we focused on studying the mediating effect of maternal self-discrepancy on the impact of parental exhaustion on wellbeing. Since the wellbeing of mothers directly impact their parenting skill and sensitivity in parenting, which in turn would affect the wellbeing of the children and their development (Panula et al., 2020), it is essential to understand the relationship between these variables. Hence, the current study employing descriptive research design examines the following research question:

Does maternal self discrepancy mediate the relationship between parental exhaustion and well-being?

METHOD

Based on the segmentation approach for developing hypotheses for mediation effects (Rungtusanatham et al., 2014), we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Parental exhaustion will significantly predict self-discrepancy among urban Indian mothers

H2: Self-discrepancy will significantly predict wellbeing among urban Indian mothers

H3: Self discrepancy will significantly mediate the effect of parental exhaustion on wellbeing among urban Indian mothers

Participants

Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) has approved the research after which the process of data collection was carried out. Participant mothers were chosen from the schools in the city of Chennai. An informed consent was sought from all the participants before filling the research questionnaire. The sample included 408 mothers.

Measures

Self-Discrepancy

An adjective checklist (Liss et al., 2013) used in previous research to measure the maternal self-discrepancy is used in this study. It includes ten qualities describing a “good mother” that were derived from previous qualitative research (Perälä-Littunen, 2018) along with five dimensions of intensive mothering. Participants were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) measuring how much these qualities describe about themselves. Participants were also asked to rate the same qualities on a similar scale of 1 to 5 to indicate how much it describes an ideal or perfect mother, according to themselves. Self-discrepancy scores were then calculated by subtracting the average scores of actual self from the ideal self. Higher the score, greater is the discrepancy experienced.

The reliability of self-discrepancy scores measured with Cronbach’s alpha is above 0.70. It shows good convergent validity with other self-rating scales.

Parental wellbeing

Parent Wellbeing Scale is a brief measure rooted in the concept of subjective wellbeing (McConkey, 2020). It has eight items on a 10-point rating scale. Participants are asked to rate their feelings while caring for their child by selecting one of the ten boxes between the two extremes shown. Scoring is done by summing up the scores of individual items and greater score indicates greater parental wellbeing. Reliability was established with good internal consistency scores measured with

Cronbach’s alpha and strongest-retest reliability was also established. It shows good criterion validity with Warwick Edinburgh scale of wellbeing.

Parental exhaustion

Parental Burnout Assessment has 23 items measured in 7-point Likert Scale (0-never to 6-everyday) (Roskam et al., 2018). It consists of four sub scales: Exhaustion (in parental role), Contrast with previous parental self, Saturation (feelings of being fed up) and Emotional distancing. Parental Exhaustion sub scale has 9 items. The reliability of the scale dimensions range between 0.77 to 0.94 and the scale has strong psychometric properties. The subscale also has high convergent validity with the emotional exhaustion subscale of PBI ($r=0.86$).

PROCEDURE

Sampling technique

Multistage stratified sampling was used to select the participants, wherein revenue divisions of Chennai viz., North, Central and South zones were chosen as the sampling units. From each of these zones, 3 schools were randomly selected. Mothers of children from these schools were contacted and those who consented to participate in the research filled the questionnaire. It included demographic questions, psychological tools to measure self-discrepancy, parental exhaustion and wellbeing.

Inclusion criteria

Mothers with no psychiatric illness (not taking medication) and having neurotypical children were included in the study. The questionnaires were in English and hence those mothers with English knowledge were included in the study.

Statistical Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 20 software was used for analysis. Statistical test Person r was used to test the relationship between maternal self-discrepancy, parental exhaustion and wellbeing. Mediation analysis was carried out using Hayes PROCESS

macro in SPSS (Hayes A.F., 2013; (Abu-Bader & Jones, 2021).

RESULTS

Descriptive analysis

The sample characteristic showing the frequency and percentage distribution of participants' demography is shown in Table 1. The descriptive statistics for the variables including mean, standard deviation and range are listed in Table 2. With the possible range of self-discrepancy being -4.00 to

4.00, it is observed that participants have reported moderate level of self-discrepancy ($M=0.30$; $SD = 0.46$). With the possible range of parental wellbeing being 8 to 80, participants have reported above average levels of wellbeing ($M = 63.04$; $SD = 12.38$). Also, the possible range of exhaustion value lies between 0 and 54, and the participants have reported below average levels of exhaustion, with average value falling considerably below the midpoint of the possible range ($M = 15.21$; $SD = 11.80$)

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N=408)

Participant's Demographic Characteristic	Frequency (%)
Age: Below 35	138 (33.8)
35 or Above	270 (66.1)
Number of Children: One	159 (39.0)
Two	240 (58.8)
Three or more	9 (2.2)
Employment*: Full time employed	155 (38.0)
Part-time employed	27 (6.6)
Stay at home	226 (55.4)
Family Type: Nuclear family	248 (60.8)
Joint family	160 (39.2)
Education: School level	68 (16.7)
Bachelor's degree	193 (47.3)
Master's degree	147 (36.0)
Income†: High Income	76 (18.6)
Upper middle	187 (45.8)
Lower middle	135 (33.1)
Low	10 (2.5)

*Employment category: Part time Employment – Salaried Employment for less than 6 hours a day

Full time Employment – Salaried Employment for more than 6 hours a day

†Income category: Low Income - less than Rs.70,069

Lower middle Income - from Rs 70,070 – Rs. 2,73,098

Upper middle Income - from Rs2,73,100- Rs. 8,45,955

High Income - beyond 8,45,956

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for study variables (N=408)

	Minimum	Maximum	Possible range	Mean (SD)
Parental Wellbeing	8	80	8 to 80	63.04 (12.38)
Parental Exhaustion	0	51	0 to 54	15.21 (11.80)
Self discrepancy	-1.0	3.6	-4.00 to +4.00	0.30 (0.46)

Correlation Analysis

A bivariate correlational analysis was conducted to study the relationship among the variables and results showed that self discrepancy and wellbeing are negatively correlated with Pearson correlation coefficient $r = -0.254$; $p = 0.00$ (<0.01), while self discrepancy and exhaustion are positively correlated with $r = 0.142$; $p = 0.004$ (<0.01). Similarly, parental exhaustion and wellbeing are negatively correlated with $r = -0.351$; $p = 0.00$ (<0.01).

Mediation Analysis

H2 was accepted.

Table 3

Mediation Analysis based on 5000 bootstrap samples

Variable/Effect	b	SE	T	p	95% Confidence level	
Parental Exhaustion on self-discrepancy IV → M	0.01	0.00	2.90	0.00**	0.00	0.01
Self-discrepancy on wellbeing M → DV	-5.63	1.24	-4.54	0.00**	-8.08	-3.19
<i>Effects</i>						
Direct	-0.34	0.05	-7.00	0.00**	-0.43	-0.24
Indirect [†]	-0.03	0.00			-0.06	-0.01
Total	-0.37	0.05	-7.55	0.00**	-0.46	-0.27

** Effect is significant at 0.01 level

†Effect is significant (95% confidence interval excludes 0)

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bootstrapping was performed using Process Macro in SPSS to analyze whether maternal self discrepancy mediated the relationship between parental exhaustion and wellbeing. The results of the indirect effect based on 5000 bootstrap samples show a significant indirect negative relationship between parental exhaustion and wellbeing, mediated by maternal self-discrepancy ($a * b = -0.03$; Bootstrap $CI_{95} = -0.06$ and -0.01). The result indicates that the confidence intervals did not cross zero, implying that the indirect effect was

Table 3 summarizes the results of our mediation analysis. The first step of our regression analysis showed that parental exhaustion (IV) was a significant predictor of self-discrepancy (M) ($b = 0.01$; $t = 2.90$; $p < 0.001$). Hence, hypothesis H1 was accepted. The second step of our regression analysis showed that, while controlling for the effect of the parental exhaustion (IV), the self-discrepancy (M) was found to significantly predict the wellbeing (DV) ($b = -5.63$; $t = -4.54$; $p < 0.001$). Hence hypothesis

significant. Hence hypothesis H3 was accepted, concluding that self-discrepancy significantly mediates the effect of parental exhaustion on wellbeing. It was also seen that the total effect $c = -0.37$; while the direct effect $c' = -0.34$, indicating that total effect is greater than direct effect, as expected in a mediated model ($c > c'$). The mediator self-discrepancy accounted for 8.1% of the total effect on wellbeing. The proposed mediation model is illustrated in Fig 1. with the results of unstandardized coefficients obtained.

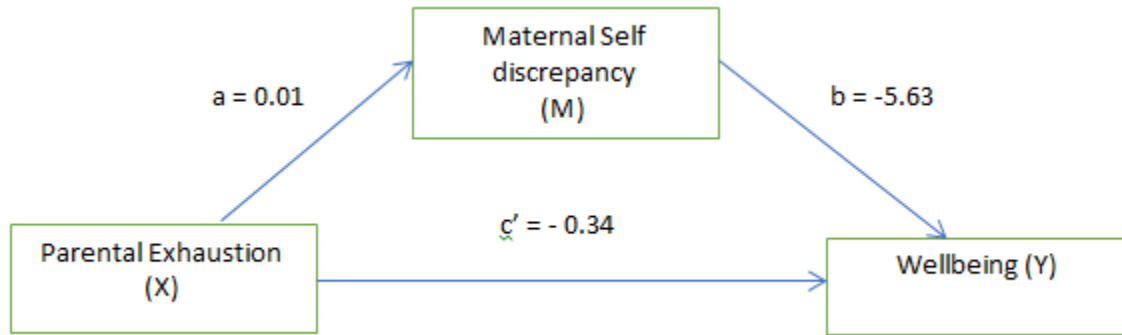


Fig 1: Proposed mediation model with unstandardized coefficients a = effect of parental exhaustion on maternal self-discrepancy, b = effect of maternal self-discrepancy on wellbeing while controlling for the effect of parental exhaustion on wellbeing, c' = direct effect of parental exhaustion on wellbeing

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between maternal self-discrepancy, parental exhaustion and wellbeing. The bivariate correlational analysis indicated that there was a moderate significant negative correlation between parental exhaustion and wellbeing. This is consistent with the existing research studies on parental burnout (Mikolajczak et al., 2019; Raudasoja et al., 2023). Similarly, the correlation analysis showed a small but significant negative correlation between self-discrepancy and wellbeing. It is demonstrated quantitatively from our data that the belief held by women that they are not living up to their internalized standards of what it means to be a good mother, affects their parental wellbeing. This finding is consistent with previous research findings which indicated that discrepancy between actual and ideal selves lead to poor wellbeing (Batram-Zantvoort et al., 2022). The small but significant positive correlation between parental exhaustion and maternal self discrepancy that is observed in our data is consistent with the research evidences that have studied the relationship between perfectionism and parental burnout

The result of mediation analysis indicates that self-discrepancy arising from beliefs of ideal parenting mediates the effect of exhaustion in parenting on wellbeing. The implication of this result is that, mothers who are already exhausted due to greater parenting demands while having very less resources

available to invest, will have a greater difficulty in managing their wellbeing if they hold irrational self depreciating beliefs about their role as a parent.

However, the direct relationship between parental exhaustion and wellbeing remained significant even after the mediator was introduced. This indicates that it is a partial mediation, wherein the self-discrepancy has reduced but not eliminated the relationship between parental exhaustion and wellbeing. Possible reason that this relationship is partially mediated could be that, other factors like less partner support or couple dissatisfaction could also mediate the relationship between exhaustion and wellbeing, as previous research studies indicated that these are important factors related to parental burnout (Gillis & Roskam, 2019; Prandstetter et al., 2023)

Overall, the current study contributes to the understanding of parental exhaustion among Indian mothers and how the incongruence in self in their parenting role would affect their subjective wellbeing.

Directions for future research

One of the limitations of this study is that it has used only the exhaustion subscale of parental burnout since it is the most important dimension. However, studying the phenomena of burnout with all the dimensions would yield an outline of prevalence of burnout among Indian mothers. It is also beneficial to understand the relationship of

parental exhaustion with other variables like personality factors of the mothers and how it impacts the children. Future research shall also focus on including mothers in rural India and that would give a complete picture of the self-perception of mothers across wide socioeconomic status in the country. A qualitative work shall also be carried out to substantiate these results to get an in-depth understanding of the emotional exhaustion and self-oriented and socially prescribed norms in parenting in Indian context.

Conclusion

Theorists in the domain of parenting has pointed out the beliefs existing in the society, according to which, it is normal for motherhood being fraught with anxiety, guilt and exhaustion (Warner, 2006). It is evident from our research that internalizing unrealistic motherhood ideals and believing that one is not living up to these standards, adds to the existing parental exhaustion and causes more detrimental effects to maternal wellbeing. The result obtained from this study would help the therapists and parenting counselors to create awareness among mothers to rationally reevaluate their perception of self and their beliefs about parenting, which in turn would improve their wellbeing and would serve as protective factor against parental burnout.

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