

Exploring the Role of Parental Communication Patterns in Academic Stress: A Qualitative Study of Sri Lankan University Students

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Abstract

Academic stress is a prevalent issue among university students, with parental communication playing a crucial role in shaping their stress experiences. While extensive research has examined academic stressors, there remains a gap in understanding how specific parental communication patterns influence students' ability to manage stress, particularly within the Sri Lankan context. This study explored how Sri Lankan university students perceived and experienced parental communication in relation to academic stress, focusing on the role of verbal encouragement, emotional understanding, and parental expectations in shaping students' stress experiences and coping mechanisms. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted, with six undergraduates (aged 19–25) purposively sampled. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Findings revealed that supportive parental communication, characterized by emotional validation and encouragement, mitigated academic stress, whereas critical or dismissive communication exacerbated stress levels. Parental expectations emerged as a significant factor influencing students' stress. The study highlights the crucial role of parental communication in academic stress among Sri Lankan undergraduates and underscores the need for parental awareness and interventions to foster healthier communication patterns. These findings provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals in developing support mechanisms to enhance students' academic well-being.

Keywords: Academic stress, parental communication, Sri Lankan undergraduates, emotional support

Introduction

Academic stress is a major concern in higher education, especially in collectivist cultures such as Sri Lanka, where family relationships deeply influence students' emotional well-being (Arslan, 2021). While parental involvement provides support, its impact varies significantly depending on communication styles, which can either alleviate or intensify academic stress (Abeywickrama, 2025). Most research highlights the benefits of supportive family environments (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022), but often neglects regional sociocultural factors. In South Asia, hierarchical and directive communication patterns may increase stress, contrasting with Western models that emphasize open, autonomy-supportive dialogue

(Deianeira et al., 2024). Additionally, family communication is rarely studied as a culturally embedded, gendered, and interactive process, limiting understanding of its complex role in academic stress. This study is guided by family systems theory (Brown & Errington, 2024), which highlights the influence of family communication patterns on emotional functioning, and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which underscores the role of autonomy-supportive communication in promoting well-being. Integrating these frameworks facilitates a culturally grounded interpretation of findings.

Research objectives

1. To examine the influence of parental communication on Sri Lankan undergraduates' perceptions of academic stress.
2. To explore the role of verbal encouragement and emotional understanding in shaping students' experiences of academic stress.
3. To investigate how parental communication patterns affect the stress management strategies employed by students.

Materials and methods

Design

This study utilised a qualitative phenomenological methodology to explore Sri Lankan undergraduates' experiences of academic stress in relation to family communication and emotional support. This approach was chosen for its capacity to capture the complexity of participants' lived experiences within their specific cultural context. In-depth, one-to-one interviews were conducted to elicit rich, context-sensitive accounts of familial interactions. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyse the data through six iterative phases: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. This analytic strategy facilitated both inductive and theory-informed interpretations while maintaining rigour through systematic documentation and reflexive engagement with the data. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Informed consent and confidentiality were maintained to protect participants' rights and ensure data integrity.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit six undergraduate students (three male and three female) from Sri Lankan universities, who were fluent in either English or Sinhala, aged between 19 and 25 years. This approach was chosen to capture a range of perspectives while enabling a rich, in-depth exploration of the lived experiences related to family communication and academic stress. All participants were full-time students in their second or third year and had sustained engagement with family members either through co-residence or regular interaction. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new codes or themes emerged from the data. The sample size aligns with established qualitative research guidelines, as Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2005) demonstrated that saturation often occurs within six to twelve interviews, supporting the adequacy of this sample to provide robust and meaningful insights in phenomenological studies. Consistent with qualitative phenomenological methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this sample size prioritizes depth and richness of individual experiences over broad generalizability.

Materials

In-depth interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes were conducted in private, participant-chosen locations to ensure comfort and confidentiality. A semi-structured interview guide was employed to maintain consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on emerging themes related to demographic context, family communication, emotional support, and stress management. Questions were designed to encourage detailed and reflective accounts of participants' lived experiences with academic stress within their family contexts. Ethical procedures—including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality—were strictly followed. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives.

Procedure

Participants were purposively sampled from Sri Lankan universities based on full-time undergraduate status (ages 19–25) and prior academic stress experience, aiming to capture rich, diverse perspectives aligned with the study objectives. To facilitate this purposive approach, recruitment was supplemented by targeted social media posts and emails to reach eligible students across multiple institutions and regions efficiently. This combined strategy aimed to enhance sample diversity while adhering to purposive criteria. Prior to interviews, participants received an Information Sheet detailing ethical considerations, including confidentiality and withdrawal rights; no withdrawals occurred. One-on-one in-person interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol to examine family communication and academic stress. While this approach enabled deeper interaction and observation of non-verbal cues, it restricted geographic reach and relied on retrospective self-reporting, increasing the risk of recall bias. Reflexive practices and open-ended questioning were used to mitigate these limitations (Noble & Smith, 2015). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and cross-verified for accuracy. Thematic analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, with iterative coding and theme refinement. Thematic saturation was confirmed during analysis, ensuring comprehensive coverage of participants' perspectives. Despite these procedures, thematic interpretation remains inherently subjective, requiring ongoing reflexivity to minimise researcher bias.

Results and discussion

Thematic analysis of six interviews underscored how parental communication, emotional responsiveness, and sociocultural expectations intertwined to shape academic stress. Three interrelated themes emerged: differentiated parental roles, dual functions of support, and coping strategies rooted in family dynamics.

Table 1: Themes, subthemes, and descriptions from participant data

Theme	Subthemes	Description
Communication Styles and Academic Stress: A Criticism–Support Continuum	Critical Communication, Supportive Communication	Communication quality mediates academic stress; critical interactions amplify stress, supportive interactions buffer it.
Gendered Parental Communication and Navigational Strategies	Fathers' Academic Emphasis, Mothers' Emotional Support	Parental roles produce differential stress effects; students navigate parental input strategically.

The Role of Verbal Encouragement and Emotional Understanding	Verbal Encouragement, Emotional Validation	Emotional responsiveness functions as a resilience mechanism in academic contexts.
Emotional Impact and Coping Strategies	Withdrawal, Active Engagement	Communication style directly shapes coping strategies and emotional outcomes.
Cultural Context: Collectivist Expectations Amplifying Stress	Family Honour, Social Reputation	Socio-cultural norms intensify academic stress through familial and societal expectations.
Transformative Effects of Supportive Communication	Growth-Oriented Mindset	Supportive parental communication facilitated mindset shifts from fear of failure to resilience and growth-focused engagement.

Communication styles and academic stress: A criticism–support continuum

The analysis identified a spectrum of parental communication patterns with significant implications for students' perceptions of academic stress. At one extreme, critical and high-pressure communication emphasised relentless achievement demands, fostering persistent feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. One participant described: *"If I get 85, they'll say, 'Why not 90?' If I get 90, they'll say, 'Why not 95?' It feels like no matter what I do, there's always something more expected of me."* (Interview A).

From the perspective of *Self-Determination Theory* (Deci & Ryan, 1985), such communication is likely to undermine the psychological need for autonomy, thereby reducing intrinsic motivation and increasing perceived stress. This is consistent with existing evidence that controlling parental behaviours predict lower well-being and higher academic strain (Skinner et al., 2005). Conversely, participants who experienced open and supportive parental communication reported greater emotional security and validation: *"They listen without judgement... one time my mother shared her own experiences with stress which made me feel understood and less alone."* (Interview C). This aligns with Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), which posits that open, validating communication enhances the adaptability of the family unit, allowing members to manage stress collaboratively. The current findings therefore support the argument that communication patterns act as systemic regulators of emotional climate within families.

Gendered parental communication and navigational strategies

A salient theme was the gendered division in parental communication styles. Fathers predominantly emphasised academic results and performance metrics, while mothers provided emotional reassurance and encouragement. This dynamic compelled students to selectively engage with parents based on their emotional needs:

"If I talk to my mom, then it's de-stressing for me. But if I talk to my father, it's a different story because he has expectations of me and then he has a plan for me and whatnot. So, even though he doesn't mention it, it's in my head. So, it's kind of stressful. So, I rarely talk to him about studies." (Interview B)

This dynamic reveals how fathers' communication aligns with societal achievement pressures, while mothers provide emotional support, reinforcing traditional gender roles in Sri Lankan families. Participants selectively sought fathers for academic advice and mothers for emotional relief, reflecting a divided coping strategy. One participant noted: *"I always talk to my dad when I need advice on studying or how to perform better. But when I'm overwhelmed, I know talking to my mom will help me feel better."* (Interview F)

This division exposes tension between performance demands and emotional needs, complicating academic stress experiences. Although consistent with previous studies (Deng et al., 2022), such patterns may limit holistic family support, highlighting a critical gap in addressing academic stress comprehensively.

The role of verbal encouragement and emotional understanding

Verbal encouragement and emotional understanding emerged as critical resilience factors. Participants receiving consistent emotional support demonstrated more adaptive stress responses and balanced academic engagement: *"Their encouragement has given me confidence and helped me develop a balanced approach to my academics and my personal life as well."* (Interview C)

However, the protective effect was moderated by delivery; well-intentioned but unsolicited advice could inadvertently increase pressure: *"She talks to me with good intention but actually that makes me have to focus on it."* (Interview A). This complexity reflects findings in family communication literature emphasizing the importance of perceived autonomy-support (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). From a self-determination theory perspective, this finding is significant because it demonstrates that even positive intentions can become controlling if the communication is not autonomy-supportive. The perception of autonomy, rather than the act of support itself, appears to determine whether the interaction reduces or exacerbates stress.

Emotional impact and coping strategies

Critically oriented communication significantly undermined students' emotional well-being, contributing to anxiety and exhaustion: *"It's exhausting because sometimes it feels like no matter how much I do it's never enough."* (Interview A)

This echoes family systems theory's proposition that chronic negative interactions can destabilise the emotional functioning of the family system. In contrast, emotionally validating communication allowed students to reframe challenges as opportunities for growth, consistent with cognitive appraisal theories of stress (Hasbrouck & Waddimba, 2017). Parental communication styles also influenced coping behaviours; critical communication often triggered avoidance: *"I started avoiding conversations about my grades... because I didn't want to hear more comments that would make me feel worse."* (Interview A)

Supportive communication fostered active problem-solving and open family dialogue: *"Whenever I had time, I talked to my family... even in my academic or personal life."* (Interview C)

These patterns are in line with self-determination theory's prediction that autonomy-supportive contexts encourage proactive engagement, while controlling contexts promote defensive withdrawal.

Cultural context: Collectivist expectations amplifying stress

The influence of Sri Lanka's collectivist cultural framework was evident, where academic success is tied to family honour and social reputation: *"Education is seen as the primary path to success."* (Interview A). This cultural pressure intensified academic stress by positioning student achievement as a collective

responsibility, corroborating cross-cultural studies on academic stress in collectivist societies (Chao, 1994). Within family systems theory, this reflects the transmission of cultural values through intergenerational communication patterns, where academic achievement becomes a proxy for family stability and cohesion. However, self-determination theory suggests that the collectivist emphasis on meeting family expectations may suppress autonomy, thereby intensifying stress despite the presence of relatedness-based support.

Transformative effects of supportive communication

Positive parental communication facilitated shifts from fear-based to growth-oriented academic mindsets: “Her words really helped me shift my mindset from focusing on the fear of failure to just trying my best.” (Interview D). Such transformations are consistent with self-determination theory’s assertion that autonomy-supportive environments enhance intrinsic motivation and resilience. Within the family systems theory framework, this reflects an adaptive recalibration of family interactions that allows the student to reinterpret stress as manageable rather than overwhelming.

This study highlights the dual role of parental communication in shaping academic stress among Sri Lankan undergraduates. Consistent with prior research, performance-oriented and critical communication exacerbates stress and encourages maladaptive coping, such as avoidance and emotional exhaustion (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). Crucially, emotionally validating and supportive communication mitigates these effects, fostering resilience and adaptive coping (Skinner et al., 2008). The gendered division of communication—fathers emphasising achievement, mothers providing emotional support—reflects entrenched sociocultural norms and forces students to navigate conflicting expectations. While similar patterns have been noted in collectivist societies (Chao, 1994), the findings indicate that these roles may perpetuate stress and constrain holistic support in the Sri Lankan context.

Collectivist pressures linking academic success to family honour further intensify stress, embedding it within broader social obligations. The paradox that well-intentioned but unsolicited advice can increase pressure challenges assumptions that parental involvement is inherently protective (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). These results emphasise the necessity of autonomy-supportive communication and the critical reassessment of parental roles in frameworks addressing academic stress.

Integrating theory into interpretation

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Family Systems Theory and Self-Determination Theory provide complementary lenses for understanding how parental communication influences academic stress. While Family Systems Theory highlights the relational and systemic nature of communication patterns, Self-Determination Theory elucidates the psychological mechanisms—particularly autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that determine whether communication functions as a stress buffer or stress amplifier. This integrated theoretical perspective not only substantiates the complex and sometimes contradictory role of parental communication observed in this study but also signals the necessity for culturally sensitive adaptations of these frameworks when applied in collectivist contexts such as Sri Lanka.

Limitations of this study, including the small sample and self-report data, constrain generalisability and preclude causal claims. Future research should adopt mixed methods and longitudinal designs to interrogate the mechanisms by which gendered communication and cultural pressures intersect, enabling a more nuanced theoretical and practical response. Practically, interventions aimed at reducing academic stress in Sri Lanka must prioritise fostering supportive, autonomy-affirming family communication while critically challenging gendered expectations that may exacerbate stress. Universities should consider family-inclusive approaches that address culturally specific dynamics to effectively support student wellbeing.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that parental communication in Sri Lankan families operates as a double-edged mechanism. Its capacity to buffer academic stress depends on whether it promotes autonomy or reinforces control. From a family systems theory perspective (Bowen, 1978), this duality reflects how entrenched interaction patterns sustain either adaptive or maladaptive emotional climates. The persistence of critical, achievement-driven discourse suggests that stress is not an incidental by-product, but an outcome structurally embedded within family functioning. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) exposes the mechanism behind this effect: communication perceived as autonomy-supportive facilitates psychological need satisfaction, whereas controlling communication erodes agency and heightens stress reactivity. Theoretical integration therefore challenges the assumption—common in collectivist contexts—that increased parental involvement is inherently protective. Instead, these findings indicate that in Sri Lanka, involvement often functions as a conduit for normative pressure, reproducing systemic stress across generations. This analysis highlights that interventions ignoring entrenched communication norms may inadvertently perpetuate academic stress. While the small, self-selected sample limits generalisability, the study contributes by embedding family communication within a culturally and theoretically informed critique. Future work must move beyond symptom-focused solutions, interrogating the socio-cultural logics that legitimise controlling parental discourse, and designing interventions that actively destabilise these patterns while strengthening autonomy-supportive dialogue.

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