



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The independent and interdependent self-affirmations in action: Understanding their dynamics in India during the early phase of the COVID-19 lockdown

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Published online: 30 May 2024.

Abstract

The study explored the role of two dissimilar familial and religious practices in distinctly shaping independent and interdependent self-affirmations in two value systems (individualism and collectivism) that emerged to protect self-integrity and self-worth challenged by the threats of COVID-19. A qualitative research design was employed. A heterogeneous sample of 27 participants (14 joint and 13 nuclear families) was recruited who reported in a semi-structured interview about the consequences of COVID-19 and the role of family and religious values in coping with the pandemic threats. The thematic method was used to analyse the data. Codes were generated using a priori criteria while reviewing and re-reviewing, multiple discussions and iterations helped in theme identification and ascertaining validity. Five themes were generated: perceived strong threat of COVID-19, dissimilar genesis of independent and interdependent self-affirmations, positive roles of joint familial values, significance of religious values, and traditional and modern religious routes of self-affirmation. Threats were expressed in experiences of anxiety, uncertainty and mood fluctuations. Interdependence, affiliation and support were joint familial values whereas independence and self-esteem reflected nuclear family-values. Focus on explicit attributes denoted modern while divine interpretation and will of God reflected traditional religious values. Novelty, uncertainty and incurability of COVID-19 caused threats to self-integrity that compelled them to affirm their most preferred values originating from two family forms. The pandemic posed threats to their self-worth, which in turn, activated affirmations in two distinct value systems leading to the development of independent and interdependent self-affirmations. Study findings help surface novel features of the two self-affirmations. It provides new insights for making successful behavioural changes at individual, group and community levels for the success of social, health and educational policies.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; Indian family; thematic analysis; religious and familial practices; self-affirmation; threat

INTRODUCTION

Unlike previous pandemics, the COVID-19 has been very fatal, unknown and unexpected and its complex social and psychological consequences are pandemic in themselves. These, in turn, may lead to fear, distrust, uncertainty, ridiculousness, propaganda, terror, social stigma, avoidance, separation, exploitation and multiple theories of the origin of disease and misconceptions among people (Bhanot et al., 2021). The pandemic has been a global societal event with enormous worldwide

communication, the strong life changes and restrictions all over the world and the predicted economic and societal consequences. For example, research reported that the recent pandemic caused extreme stress, anger, restrictions and fear of infection (Brooks et al., 2020) and panic experiences, feeling of isolation, anxiety, irritability, lowered social support and a variety of negative health outcomes for children and adults (Jiao et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly altered social and psychological values in India. Fear, uncertainty, and isolation have strained mental well-being. Societal solidarity emerged as communities adapted to challenges. Remote work blurred boundaries, emphasizing work-life balance. A heightened awareness of health and hygiene reshaped interpersonal dynamics, fostering a collective resilience amidst adversity.

The family acts as an important and universal agency that provides care, security and identity for its members and helps deal with life challenges. Based on structures and

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functions, families may be joint or nuclear. Thus, in a joint family, mutual support during the pandemic fosters a robust self-affirmation process, as shared responsibilities and emotional connections enhance resilience. In nuclear families, self-affirmation relies more on individual coping strategies, potentially leading to increased stress due to limited support networks. In India, joint family structures fostered collective support during the pandemic, with multiple generations sharing responsibilities. Joint families coped better with lockdown challenges as they could pool resources and provide emotional support. In contrast, nuclear families faced increased isolation and self-reliance. Cultural norms also influenced adherence to public health practices, with joint families often adhering more strictly to guidelines due to a collective responsibility mindset, while nuclear families relied on individual initiatives, impacting overall pandemic responses. A joint family is a consanguineal unit that includes two or more generations of kindred related through either paternal or maternal line who maintain a common residence and are subject to common social, economic and religious regulations (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020a) whereas a nuclear family comprises to a group consisting only of parents and children (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020b). The joint family system is the primary vehicle of collective values and practices guided by shared identity, deep bonds, unique socialization, emotionality, meaning, relationships, concern for others, interdependence, and relatively enduring relationships (Cai et al., 2013). In contrast, a nuclear family is based on individualistic values, emphasizing individual identity, independence, self-esteem, and personal accomplishments (Cai et al., 2013; Gupta & Sukamto, 2020).

Psychological processes that shape individual responses to normal and challenging life situations are explained through individualism-collectivism paradigm. Individualism is characterized by independence, personal interests, emotional detachment, individual achievements, and self-sufficiency, while collectivism reflects interdependence, in-group interests, group achievement, cooperation and harmonious relationships (Hofstede, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). According to Triandis (1995), individualism and collectivism may be of horizontal and vertical types. Individuals with horizontal individualism strive to be distinct without distinct status while horizontal collectivism denotes interdependence with equality. Vertical individualism showed individuals' striving to be distinct with special status whereas vertical collectivism emphasizes interdependence with inequalities and competition with out-groups (Singelis et al., 1995). Different values of individualism-collectivism are salient for interpersonal and societal issues.

Smith and Schwartz (1997) suggest that values related to individualism-collectivism function differently to cope with societal challenges. They further argue that a set of coping strategies are associated with adaptive demands which are expressed, maintained and justified by a particular interrelated set of bipolar values. Conservatism versus autonomy is one strategy, in which an individual is either embedded in collectivity, status quo, group identity, and shared way of life or guided by independence, uniqueness, and individual pursuits. Hierarchy versus egalitarianism is the second strategy, which reflects the significance of ascribed roles, obligations, and legitimacy of inequality or provides for equality of morality and interest. Mastery versus harmony is the third dimension, which either seeks to promote change, assert control and promote exploitation to further group interests, or

preserves existing world order to maintain harmony (Smith & Schwartz, 1997).

In addition to other negative consequences, the pandemic caused serious threats to self-integrity and self-worth of people worldwide. In India, the nexus between family, religion, and pandemic resilience is evident. Studies highlight the pivotal role of joint family structures, prevalent in India, in fostering emotional support and resource sharing during crises, aiding in coping with the pandemic's challenges. Moreover, religious communities often serve as social safety nets. For instance, during the COVID-19 surge in 2020, Sikh temples, known as 'gurudwaras,' organized langars (community kitchens) to provide free meals, showcasing how religious institutions play a crucial role in collective well-being during crises (Tiwari, et al., 2022). This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the interconnectedness of familial and religious networks in navigating global health crises. In India, during the pandemic, family and religion played pivotal roles in coping strategies. Families provided emotional support and caregiving for COVID-19 patients, exemplified by joint efforts in makeshift home care. Religious institutions facilitated aid distribution and coordinated community initiatives, fostering a sense of solidarity. Temples, mosques, and gurudwaras transformed into makeshift hospitals or food distribution centres, showcasing the integral role of religion in providing societal resilience during challenging times (Fatima et al., 2022; Tiwari et al., 2024; Verma et al., 2024). Individuals may have responded to these threats through their affirming in their most preferred values, actions and relationships. As people differ in the basic nature, composition and dynamics of their self-construal, the benefits of practising self-affirmation discussed above may be more valid for people brought up in individualistic culture who carry independent self (Cai et al., 2013).

Research suggests that people from Asiatic societies differ in their basic nature of self-construal from those of American and Western societies and their self is said to be interdependent in nature (Cai et al., 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While independent self-construal is characterized by its focus on the protection of individual rights and cognitions, the interdependent or relational self-construal features connection, relation and wide social units (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, the benefits of independent self-affirmation may not be directly generalized to individuals having interdependent self-construal (Cai et al., 2013). The study's findings from an Indian sample broaden our comprehension of self-affirmation within a distinct cultural context. India's rich cultural tapestry, encompassing diverse family structures, religious practices, and societal norms, introduces unique dynamics to self-affirmation. Exploring how individuals affirm themselves amidst the intricacies of Indian culture provides nuanced insights into the impact of collective values on personal resilience. This expansion of the concept beyond Western-centric perspectives enhances the universality of self-affirmation, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive approaches in understanding and promoting individual well-being across global contexts.

In India, family and religious practices intricately shape self-affirmation. Joint family structures often prioritize collective well-being, fostering a sense of belonging and support. Religious practices, deeply ingrained in daily life, provide individuals with a moral compass and a source of strength during adversity. This differs from more individualistic societies, where self-affirmation might be more autonomous. The collectivist nature of Indian culture

implies that personal affirmation is closely intertwined with familial and communal bonds.

Comparatively, in individualistic cultures, self-affirmation may be more independent of family and religious influences. The implications for existing theories lie in recognizing the cultural nuances affecting self-affirmation. Integrating cultural factors into frameworks like attachment theory or social identity theory becomes crucial for a comprehensive understanding. Acknowledging diverse cultural practices informs the development of more universally applicable psychological theories, emphasizing the need for context-specific approaches to self-affirmation research and interventions.

Studies suggest that the relational self has been reported to comprise familial self and close-other self and its defensiveness-soothing caused by relational self-affirmation effects may occur due to the familial bonds (e.g., Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005). Relational self-affirmation may be more useful for people of Indian society which is collectivistic in nature. Relational self-affirmation may be more guided by interdependence, affiliation and social harmony (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005). The major precursor of relational self is the unique familial and collectivistic values which are orientated towards relationships and concern for others. Familialism has been conceptualized as a cultural value involving interdependent, emotional and relatively permanent relationships (Cai et al., 2013). Research posited that these basic differences in two types of self-construal may have significant implications for affirmation processes (Cai et al., 2013; Tiwari et al., 2022).

Studies witnessed the fact that lockdown and quarantine declared after the outbreak of COVID-19 have been relatively successful in India as compared to other countries of the world (Koshy, 2020; Tiwari et al., 2022). To some extent, it may be due to the interdependent nature of the self-construal of Indian people who showed collective self-affirmation in the face of strong threat to their life, self-worth and existence. The interdependent self-construal and collective values cultivated by the Indian joint family may have prompted the affirmation process of the Indian people in the face of pandemic threat through a positive feedback loop between the self-system and the social system (Cohen & Sherman, 2014) and thus, may have motivated them to follow the desirable restrictions leading to the mass support to the restrictions of lockdown and quarantine instead of opposition (Tiwari et al., 2022). Group affirmation also leads to higher conformity to group norms that, in turn, may enhance pro-social collective action (Badea et al., 2021). Recent studies suggest that even a brief self-affirmation in most preferred values, activities, and relationships can encourage and motivate people to struggle with their negative thinking, to recover and reduce anxiety and stress, and boost confidence despite the challenges they face during the COVID-19 pandemic (Li et al., 2020, 2022). Self-affirmation helps people during the pandemic by reminding them of their importance, looking at a threat from a broader perspective, decoupling the self and the threat, and providing a buffer against the threat and its consequences (Li et al., 2022).

Other coping strategies such as, emotion versus problem-based strategies (Folkman, 1984) and active versus avoidant coping strategies (Carver et al., 1989) were suggested to face life odds. These bifurcated approaches overlook the comprehensive nature coping styles which are employed in association with identity threats (Jaspal et al., 2020). According to the identity process theory of Breakwell (2017), difficult life situations threaten the identity of people by changing their perceptions of self and

others that lead them to use intra-psychic, interpersonal and intergroup levels of coping strategies. In the face of threats, individuals construct their identity through assimilation-accommodation (new identity labels) and evaluation (new attributions to the contents of identity) which are guided by motivational principles of self-esteem (personal and social worth), self-efficacy (belief in competence), continuity (thread between past, present and future), and distinctiveness (feelings of uniqueness). The imbalance to these principles caused by internal and external forces may lead to perceive threats (Breakwell, 2017). For difficult life situations, such as the recent pandemic, individuals may have used all three strategies to deal with the threats.

Due to the modern influences of materialism, industrialization, urbanization and increasing prevalence of postmodern lifestyles, individualism also grew in India parallel to the collectivism (Gupta & Sukamto, 2020; Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). The adoption of smartphones and social media exemplifies India's modernization, connecting individuals across diverse regions. Concurrently, traditional joint-family structures are evolving towards nuclear families, showcasing a shift toward individualism. Educational choices increasingly prioritize personal interests over societal expectations, reflecting changing values. Yet, festivals and rituals maintain their significance, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. This complex interplay illustrates how India navigates the dynamics of modernization while preserving its rich tapestry of collective and individual values. The Indian psyche is a reflection of Indian socio-cultural realities which is highly complex and carries contradictory values, the coexistence of opposites and a high tolerance of dissonance (Chaudhuri, 2003). Although, the cognitive-emotional structure of the majority of the Indians reflects value orientation, in real life circumstances they may seem to be conditioned by the demands of the situations (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). The boundaries of mental structures of Indians reflect constant shifting and variable and, thus, individualism and collectivism often act as figure and ground depending on the nature of exigencies of the situations (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). Thus, it may be argued that individualism and collectivism coexist in India, and religiousness and family are major vehicles through which they are expressed and regulated. It would be logical to test the functioning of independent and interdependent self-affirmations through joint and nuclear family systems and religiousness.

Given the cultural diversity of Indian society, it may appear from outside that a single strategy to deal with the pandemic may not work with uniform effectiveness, oneness is visible in Indian society which is not imposed from outside rather it is deeper and comes from within its beliefs, tolerance and customs which recognize and encourage variety. During the pandemic, Indian cultural values manifested prominently in everyday practices. The concept of "Seva" (selfless service) became evident as communities organized to aid the vulnerable. Traditional practices like yoga gained popularity for promoting physical and mental well-being. Families emphasized the significance of togetherness and mutual support, reinforcing the value of strong familial bonds. Additionally, the prevalence of virtual celebrations and religious ceremonies showcased the resilience of cultural traditions in adapting to challenging circumstances. Despite religious multiplicity, unity is the spontaneous response in difficult times of external aggression, natural disasters and pandemics reflecting common cause.

Social and cultural unity is maintained through mutual understanding, tolerance of dissonance, shared values and interdependence (Lad, 2015) which are core features of Indianness and Indian psyche (Kapur et al., 2011). It may be explained through the concept of cognitive polyphasia that explains how different and inconsistent views, knowledge, rationalities can coexist in a culture, group, or even in an individual (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernández, 2015). The negative consequences of the pandemic can be explained by various classical theories of psychology. To this end, Cannon's fight or flight theory may be helpful in understanding consonant physiological processes (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Similarly, the Illness Perceptions Theory (Leventhal et al., 1998) may have implications for interpreting the causes behind perceived psychological distress and diminished beneficial outcomes. Likewise, self-efficacy may be disrupted due to the uncertainty and novelty of the recent pandemic. Therefore, the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) can play a crucial role in understanding the consequences of the pandemic.

The current study

The universal severe threat caused by COVID-19 pandemic may have posed serious threats to the self-integrity and self-worth of Indian people. Since traditional methods to maintain self-integrity was not effective, they may have compelled to employ a variety of psychological mechanisms to protect their self-integrity and self-worth. Self-affirmation is one of the positive mechanisms people use to protect their integrity and worth in the face of threats and challenges of their life. Self-affirmation refers to a set of motivational processes that help people to regain their self-integrity and self-worth in the face of threats (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

Self-integrity and self-worth are socially shared conceptions and originate from socio-cultural and historical processes which are helpful for people to cultivate cognitive flexibility, positive social comparisons in times of failure, collective identity, reduction of prejudice, and positive health outcomes (Alexander, 2014; Sherman & Kim, 2005) and to lower negative psychological and physiological outcomes (Creswell et al., 2005). Most of the recent studies on self-affirmation have been conducted on the samples drawn from American and Western cultures using quantitative methods which have been reported to cultivate individualistic self (Cai et al., 2013; Li et al., 2022).

Although the coping strategies of people during the recent pandemic have been studied extensively, there is little research on self-affirmation of individualist and collectivist cultures simultaneously and inherent mechanisms to face severe mass threat of a pandemic using a qualitative method. The present study employed a qualitative design since it is useful where there is no guiding framework to explore a new phenomenon in novel situations (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, the information provided by semi-structured interviews may help gain a better understanding of the underlying processes and mechanisms of independent and interdependent self-affirmations, which have already been identified - though not fully explained - in experimental studies. In this backdrop, the current study aims to understand the role of familial and religious practices in shaping independent and interdependent self-affirmations in the relevant values in facing the threats of the COVID-19 pandemic in a heterogeneous Indian sample by employing the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design in which the data were collected through telephonic semi-structured interview protocol to develop an in-depth comprehension of the experiences of the role of two types of family systems and religious practices in facing the threats caused by COVID-19 to prompt the awareness and practice of relevant values assumed to facilitate self-affirmation to face the threat of the recent pandemic. The study used a constructivist approach which refers to a dialogical exchange between the interviewers and interviewees to the shreds of meanings held by them. The inductive and deductive processes were used to make interpretations and inferences (Levitt et al., 2018).

Research Team

All five authors have a good background in qualitative research in Psychology. The first author was a faculty member and the rest were doctoral candidates. The differences in age and experiences were managed by regular discussion among the researchers through Skype and WhatsApp calls. These variations expanded diversity in debates, subject matter, and methodological proficiency, contributing to a broadened perspective on the research questions. This resulted in a productive triangulation process, fostering a deeper comprehension of the phenomena under investigation. The authors 1 contributed in conceptualization and final draft writing while the rest contributed in data collection, analysis and initial manuscript draft writing. All the authors had sufficient experiences of residing in rural and urban areas.

Participants

A total of 36 participants were contacted initially for recruiting them to the study. Out of these, 27 participants (Age Range = 25-45 years, *Mean Age* = 32.56, *SD* = 4.61) were chosen through a purposive and snowball sampling methods for a qualitative study. Out of these, 14 participants were from the joint families (*Age Range* = 25-45 years, *Mean Age* = 33.14, *SD* = 4.99) and the rest 13 were from the nuclear families (*Age Range* = 27-41 Years, *Mean Age* = 31.92, *SD* = 4.27). The participants belonged to the rural and urban areas of Sagar, Lucknow, Prayagraj, Varanasi, and Delhi cities of India. The detailed demographic information has been displayed in Table 1.

Recruitment of the Participant

The participants were not known to the researchers and were approached through the snow-ball technique. As there was a nationwide lockdown so the interviews were conducted by calling them on their mobile phones. The interviews were conducted during April 15, 2020, to June 30, 2020. The researchers did not provide any compensation to them for their participation in the study. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Doctor Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India. The interviews were conducted only after the participants had given their consent through the call to participate in the study. Participants provided consent on phone call for the study by verbally confirming their willingness to participate. The content and responses of their verbal affirmations indicated a comprehensive understanding of the study's objectives. Before the start of

the interview, they were debriefed about the basic study goals. A purposive sampling method was used as it is appropriate when the goal is to inquire about the experiences more relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2014). It also helped to choose the information-rich cases who can draw upon their knowledge and experiences to the research questions (Patton, 2015).

The sample size for data collection was determined following the recommendations of Guest et al. (2006) who suggested a sample size 12 to be sufficient for studies which use purposive sampling. The participants belonged to the middle-class families adhering to the Hindu religion. Two inclusion criteria were adopted: participants with a graduate degree or above (information-rich case and expressivity) and living with their nuclear or joint family. The participants whose educational qualification fell below graduation or living as a single for longer times were excluded from the study. The saturation was recorded after completing 23 interviews when no new themes and codes generated from further interviews consistent with the research questions (Saunders et al., 2018). Two more interviews each from the participants of joint and nuclear families were conducted to verify the saturation. An initial discussion among the authors was held to develop a preliminary interview protocol.

Table 1.
Biographic Information of the Participants (N = 27)

S. No.	Measure	Descriptions	Frequencies (%)
1.	Age (in years)	25-29	05(18.52)
		30-35	15(55.56)
		36-40	05(18.52)
		41-45	02(7.41)
2.	Gender	Female	13(48.15)
		Male	14(51.85)
3.	Family Structure	Joint	14(51.85)
		Nuclear	13(48.15)
4.	Family Size	1-4	11(40.74)
		5-8	10(37.04)
		9-12	05(18.52)
		13-16	01(3.70)
5.	Domicile	Rural	09(33.33)
		Urban	18(66.67)
6.	Education	Graduation	11(40.74)
		Postgraduation	13(48.15)
		M. Phil/Ph.D.	03(11.11)
7.	Marital Status	Married	18(66.67)
		Unmarried	09(33.33)

Data Collection

The data were collected through a telephonic semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol was developed as per the goals that remained constant throughout the study. The interview started with some preliminary queries about the causes and impacts of COVID-19 on human life. These preliminary questions were meant to understand their comprehension about the basics of the pandemic and its impacts on human life. We partially analyzed responses to these preliminary questions to ascertain that the pandemic posed significant threats to

their life and self-worth, which is a prerequisite condition to the activation of self-affirmation processes. We did not those parts of the data which described literal details of the COVID-19 disease albeit we were interested to know its impacts on the participants' self-processes.

The data were collected over the telephone in a single attempt when they were staying at their homes during the lockdown declared after the outbreak of the COVID-19. The mean length of the interview was 45.15 min that ranged between 36 min to 54 min. During this period, majority of the participants could explore their experiences pertinent to the questions asked to them. The contents were recorded in writing while conducting the interviews. The interview questions were framed in Hindi on the nature, severity and impacts of the pandemic on the life of the participants, the roles of the familial and religious values helpful in coping with the threat of COVID-19. Each participant was asked the following open-ended interview questions, which were adopted, elaborated or used flexibly depending on the requirements of the individual context:

- 1) What do you know about the nature, causes and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on human life?
- 2) Can you please elaborate upon your family values, practices and relationships that have been helpful to you and your family in dealing effectively with the menace of the pandemic?
- 3) What are your religious beliefs and practices that have been helpful in dealing with the negative consequences of the current pandemic? Please describe in detail.
- 4) How do these family and religious values and practices benefit you and your family in understanding and regulating the negative consequences of the pandemic during the lockdown?
- 5) What are other socio-cultural factors that are helping to deal with the negative consequences of the current pandemic?

Data-Analytic Strategies

The thematic analysis method was used to analyze study data. It comprises of the organization and preparation of the data, obtaining a general sense of the information, coding, generating categories or themes and interpreting the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were assigned to each participant to ascertain confidentiality while reliability was assured by checking and rechecking of their codes. We ensured that participants' anonymity is maintained and cannot be traced through the codes provided. The transcriptions were read multiple times to enhance familiarity with the interview contents, intrinsic meaning, insights and descriptions of the contents (Barbour, 2001). A priori criteria were adopted for generating codes: the nature and amount of threat caused by COVID, values of the joint and nuclear families relevant for a positive role in dealing with the threat, pertinent religious values with a significant and explicit role in affirming values, the distinctive roles of individualistic and collectivistic family values and the traditional and modern religious beliefs and practices relevant for affirmation. These coding criteria were determined keeping in mind the study goals.

The transcriptions of the interview contents of each participant were coded, reviewed and discussed multiple times to enhance reliability (Barbour, 2001). Initially, the first six transcripts were assessed independently by the authors to check the suitability of the coding criteria to finalize the coding framework keeping in mind the study goals. It helped to come up with appropriate inclusions and

exclusions of the codes in a specific criterion. These coded were reorganized, merged and re-categorized for further refinement and selection of the relevant codes according to the suggestions of the researchers (Guest et al., 2012).

A handwritten codebook was used to keep the records of the codes (their origin, coder etc.) and the coding framework. The codebook was assessed and reviewed regularly to insert needed modifications. This revision of the coding framework helped to generate appropriate codes and leave irrelevant codes. An iterative approach was employed until the complete analysis to enhance the quality of coding. A gap of seven days was made between the initial and final scrutiny and review of the transcripts to minimize the deformations caused by over-involvement in the data as per the recommendations of the earlier researchers (Guest et al., 2012). The inductive method and constructionist approach were employed to generate more refined codes from raw narratives as per the research questions. Codes were created through a systematic application of predetermined criteria during thorough reviews. The process involved multiple discussions and iterative assessments, contributing to the identification and clarification of study themes. The utilization of a priori criteria ensured a structured and methodical approach to coding, while the continuous review and discussion cycles enhanced the accuracy and reliability of theme identification. The rigorous methodology applied in the generation of codes underscores the precision and thoroughness in the study's analytical process, fostering confidence in the validity of the identified themes. These efforts helped to generate the final codes with a set of relevant themes. The evolving themes were validated by consistent discourse, frequent online discussion, cross-referencing themes and their interpretations, and employing an iterative approach. The methodological integrity was achieved by a regular evaluation of the data for their adequacy to the research questions and approach of analysis, recurrent discussion, attending the evidence, keeping the insight and meaning, coherency, a goal-focused consistent analysis and by maintaining a codebook to maintain a high ethical standard.

RESULTS

The study of self-affirmation holds significance as it sheds light on the psychological mechanisms influencing individual well-being and behavior. Understanding how self-affirmation contributes to resilience, emotional health, and decision-making processes can inform interventions for personal growth and mental health. Additionally, insights into self-affirmation may have broader applications in areas such as education, therapy, and interpersonal relationships, fostering a deeper

comprehension of human cognition and aiding in the development of strategies for positive self-development.

This research offers novel insights into the impact of COVID-19 on self-affirmation, specifically examining variations between joint and nuclear families. By scrutinizing how different family structures navigate the pandemic, the study explores distinct patterns of self-affirmation. It unveils potential disparities in coping mechanisms, resilience, and psychological well-being between individuals in joint and nuclear family setups. Understanding these nuances can inform tailored interventions and support strategies for diverse family contexts, contributing to a deeper comprehension of the pandemic's psychological repercussions and aiding in the development of targeted approaches to enhance self-affirmation in the face of crisis.

The findings on self-affirmation in the context of the pandemic enrich our understanding of its dynamics within India's diverse societal fabric. Uncovering nuances in self-affirmation across varied family structures, from joint to nuclear, provides insights into coping mechanisms and resilience. Moreover, accounting for diverse religious practices highlights the nuanced interplay between cultural values and individual well-being. This comprehensive analysis contributes to a holistic comprehension of self-affirmation during crises in India, facilitating culturally sensitive interventions. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing targeted strategies that acknowledge and respect the diversity inherent in Indian society's family structures and religious practices.

Five themes were identified regarding the familial and religious roots of independent and interdependent self-affirmations. Each male was assigned a code of M followed by serial number and type of his family affiliations. For example, the code M_1_NF showed that the participant was a male placed at serial number one among males and belonged to a nuclear family. Likewise, each female was allotted the code F followed by a serial number and nature of the family she belonged to. For instance, the code F_3_JF denoted that the participant was a female placed at serial number 3 among females and was living in a joint family. The selection of specific codes was driven by their alignment with predetermined criteria, ensuring relevance to the research objectives. Choosing codes that directly correspond to study themes enhances the precision and effectiveness of thematic analysis. This deliberate coding process aids in systematically organizing and interpreting the data, facilitating a nuanced understanding of patterns and connections within the information. By adhering to chosen codes that reflect key aspects of the research, thematic analysis becomes a robust tool for uncovering meaningful insights and patterns in the collected data. The study themes, codes and their meaning/definitions are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2.
Study Themes, Codes and Their Meaning/Definitions (N = 27)

S. No.	Themes	Codes	Meaning/definition	Frequencies	No. of joint family participants reported (%)	No. of nuclear family participants reported (%)
1.	COVID caused a strong threat among the	Strong uncertainty	Ambiguity about different aspects of future of the pandemic	45	09(64.29)	13(100)
		Fear	Apprehension of loss	47	12(85.71)	13(100)
		Unfamiliarity with treatment and	It denotes the unfamiliarity of the treatment and prevention of the	35	11(78.57)	12(92.31)

participants	prevention methods	disease				
	Unfamiliarity with modes of infections	It shows poor knowledge of communication of the disease	23	05(35.71)	09(69.23)	
	Unavailability of medicine and vaccine	The appropriate medical help is not available.	49	12(85.71)	11(84.62)	
	Apprehension of multiple loss	It comprises current and future loss of life, financial loss, reduced educational opportunities for children, lowered opportunities of employment, social interactions, and reduced freedom of movements, and good health and well-being	55	11(78.57)	12(92.31)	
	Ineffectiveness of health system	The current health facilities are ineffective	54	12(85.71)	13(100)	
	The influx of COVID-related information	Excessive information related to COVID-19 through social, electronic and print media	61	09(64.29)	12(92.31)	
	Collective loss	It includes loss of relationships, other people, social order, and people with lower economic status	45	13(92.86)	05(38.46)	
	Individualistic loss	This category of loss includes loss of income, education, personal health and well-being, and personal freedom	22	09(64.29)	13(100)	
	Extreme anxiety, pain, panic experiences, helplessness and fluctuations in moods	These include common non-clinical symptoms described by the participants	24	8(57.14)	12(92.31)	
	Expression of 'We'	We feelings involves perceiving and explaining needs, well-being and existence of individual, group and community keeping in mind relationship, harmony, social order etc.	69	14(100)	03(23.08)	
	Expression of 'I'	It includes individual need-focused understanding and regulation of life events	21	02(14.29)	12(92.31)	
	Cautiousness	It includes alertness about life consequences	36	11(78.57)	13(100)	
	Pervasive helplessness and apprehensions	It denotes occurrences of something negative and harmful to oneself and others	25	09(64.29)	13(100)	
	Over-protectiveness in interpersonal and social interactions	It comprises observing social distancing, hand-washing, avoiding unknowns and wearing of mask	45	07(50)	11(84.62)	
	2.	Joint and nuclear families cultivated different values relevant for self-affirmation	Interdependence and cooperation (collectivistic values)	Beliefs and practices of mutuality in relationship and life goals	48	14(100)
		Interdependent self-construal (collectivistic values)	Perceiving life events in relation to interpersonal and communal terms	47	14(100)	04(30.77)
		Selflessness social rules (collectivistic values)	It represents observance of societal rules for social order and harmony	49	12(85.71)	04(30.77)
		Prominence of community in place of individual needs (collectivistic values)	Preference of other and group interests over the personal ones	52	14(100)	01(7.70)
		We-feeling (collectivistic values)	Understanding life events in relation to others	71	14(100)	02(15.39)
		Team spirit (collectivistic values)	Working to achieve group goals and satisfy others needs	54	14(100)	04(30.77)
		Importance of family and community (collectivistic values)	Priority of group goals over the personal ones	59	14(100)	05(38.46)
		Supporting others and higher value for social contributions (collectivistic values)	Life efforts are directed to help others and achieve group goals	57	14(100)	03(23.08)
		Independent self-construal (individualistic values)	Perceiving life events in relation to personal life goals	26	02(14.29)	12(92.31)
		Individual focus	Revolving around personal life goals	28	03(21.43)	13(100)
		Uniqueness	Focusing on personal attributes	27	04(28.57)	13(100)

	(individualistic values)	Achievement-orientation	Directed to achieve things that satisfy personal needs	30	05(35.71)	13(100)
	(individualistic values)	Self-reliance	Assuming oneself responsible for all happenings of life	36	09(64.29)	12(92.31)
	(individualistic values)	Focus on individual affairs and loss	Confined to personal happenings of life	28	02(14.29)	13(100)
	(individualistic values)					
3.	Values of the joint family played a significant and positive role in self-affirmation leading to perceived positive outcomes	Multiplicity of relationships	It indicates the presence of a complex set of relationships in a joint family	39	14(100)	04(30.77)
		Observance of discipline and obedience	It refers to the acceptance and family rule following	42	14(100)	07(53.85)
		Defined routine	It includes regular and defined habits of eating, sleeping, and work	45	14(100)	06(46.15)
		Wider temporal dimension	Senior members provide for longer temporal dimension through their experiences of life	38	13(92.86)	02(15.39)
		Religious practices	Belief in God, worshiping, devotion and fasting are indicatives of religious practices	48	14(100)	03(23.08)
		Sharing, emotional bond, mutual understanding and mingling are more frequent	Following some common discipline, sacrifice, multiple sources of entertainment and control by the elders come under this code	46	14(100)	04(30.77)
		Interpersonal emotional bond	Reiteration of constant support, and close relationship provide strong emotional bond	45	14(100)	08(61.54)
		A system of care	It reflects the care of younger by elders	47	14(100)	05(38.46)
		A focus on learning	Elders of family constantly monitoring and facilitate learning of academic and non-academic skills	35	13(92.86)	04(30.77)
	Positive involvement of senior elders in children	It is reflected in storytelling, game playing and positive talks by elders with children	34	14(100)	00(00)	
	Constant watch	Family elders regulate behaviours and routine of children through love and affection and easing of experience of learning and appropriate rewards	39	14(100)	02(15.39)	
4.	Religious values have an explicit role in affirming values	Religious and spiritual values, practices and goals	Efforts at achieving goals such as <i>Purusarthas</i> (object of human pursuit): <i>Dharma</i> (righteousness, moral values), <i>Artha</i> (prosperity, economic value), <i>Kama</i> (pleasure, psychological value) and <i>Moksha</i> (liberation, spiritual value) propounded in religious scriptures and embedded in practices	62	14(100)	03(23.08)
		Broader life philosophy	Attempts to attain other-worldly life goals through <i>Dharma</i> , a set of behaviours, beliefs and practices that make life better and satisfying to all	51	13(92.86)	01(7.70)
		Right way of living	It denotes observance of right life paths as prescribed in <i>Dharma</i>	46	13(92.86)	05(38.46)
		Spiritual life	Beliefs and practices that bind all in a meaningful way	37	14(100)	06(46.15)
		Beliefs and worship of God	Happiness, satisfaction and fulfilment	38	14(100)	04(30.77)
	Equanimity	Remain balanced in happiness and sorrows	27	14(100)	02(15.39)	
5.	Traditional and modern religious beliefs and practices were observed with dissimilar	Basic religious values of Joint family	They include idol worship, belief in the omnipresence of God, renunciation, liberal giving, dedication, truth, non-violence and self-control	57	14(100)	01(7.70)
		More concrete aspects of religion	Individuals in nuclear families with the focus on health and well-being through meditation and exercise	59	14(100)	03(23.08)
		Remembering about	Focusing on God for personal	68	14(100)	05(38.46)

implications for affirmation	<i>Ishwar</i> (God) Well-being	development Happiness and satisfaction in life	29	14(100)	04(30.77)
	Belief in <i>karma</i>	Assuming the consequences of life efforts as truth	57	11(78.57)	13(100)
	Family discipline	Prominence of rules of a family in important matters of life	54	14(100)	04(30.77)
	<i>Yoga</i>	<i>Yoga</i> is psycho-physiological and spiritual processes that include <i>Asanas</i> (postures) like ' <i>Surya Namaskar</i> ', ' <i>Anulom Vilom</i> ' and ' <i>Kapalbhati</i> '	54	13(92.86)	13(100)

Theme 1: COVID-19 caused strong threats among the participants.

The pandemic caused strong uncertainty and fear due to the lack of exact methods and modes of infections, unavailability of medicine and vaccine, apprehension of extreme loss of lives of family members as well others on a mass scale and ineffectiveness of existing health systems, constant bombarding of COVID-19 related information through electronic media and social media among all the participants. These threats of the participants were expressed in many forms. For example, majority of them expressed their threats in the forms of expected current and future loss of life, financial loss, reduced educational opportunities for children, lowered opportunities of employment, social interactions, and reduced freedom of movements, good health and well-being. The focus of loss was perceived according to the nature of affiliating family. The participants with joint family affiliation used 'We' more frequently in their expressions (100%) while the use of 'I' was more pronounced in the verbalizations of nuclear family participants (92.31%). Three subthemes were identified:

Subtheme 1: interdependent threats

The participants living in a joint family were more concerned about collective loss (JF = 92.86%, NF = 38.46%) (e.g., relationships, other people, social order, and people with lower economic status). These were expressed in the following quote:

The pandemic is certainly one of the most fatal and harming diseases a human society has ever faced. It will affect the health, well-being and economic conditions of everyone especially to the people leaving in lower economic status. It will swallow the lives of people on a mass scale. It may ruin the existing social order. The restrictions of lockdown and quarantine will leave people dying of hunger and disease which may be cured. Families will get finished. (F_5_JF)

Subtheme 2: independent threats

The participants living in nuclear families were more concerned about individualistic loss (income, education, personal health and well-being, personal freedom etc.) (JF = 64.29%, NF = 100%). The following quote reflects these concerns:

COVID-19 is very dangerous as its methods of infections from one person to others are not well-known. It may damage health, income and freedom. (M_1_NF)

Threats to self-integrity in joint families may arise from societal expectations, potentially leading to limited individual autonomy. Conversely, nuclear families may face challenges stemming from isolation and a heavier burden on individual resilience. Balancing personal aspirations with familial obligations poses a risk in both contexts,

impacting self-integrity. Navigating collective expectations while maintaining individual identity is a delicate task, highlighting the intricate interplay between societal norms and personal autonomy in joint and nuclear family settings.

In joint family contexts, threats to self-integrity may arise from collective expectations and interdependence, potentially leading to conformity and limited autonomy. Individual identity may be overshadowed by familial roles and obligations. Conversely, in nuclear families emphasizing individualism, threats may emerge from isolation and lack of communal support, impacting emotional well-being. Balancing autonomy within collectivist structures and fostering a sense of community in individualistic settings are essential. Recognizing these threats is crucial for promoting healthy self-integrity, advocating for cultural sensitivity, and tailoring interventions that navigate the delicate balance between individualism and collectivism in diverse family dynamics.

Subtheme 3: common threats

There were many similarities in the perceptions of the pandemic in terms of psychological distress. For example, the majority of the participants described that the pandemic has caused extreme anxiety, pain, uncertainty, panic experiences, helplessness and fluctuations in moods (JF = 57.14%, NF = 92.31%). The loss of freedom and autonomy were expressed as under:

Due to COVID-19, we often experience anxiety and depression, we are really worried about future; we don't know when this lockdown will get over when we will live like we used to do; we are stuck in my house and living at the same place since last thirty days has made me impatient, we cannot go out, cannot meet friends, family, people and relatives. (M_4_JF)

The occurrence of pandemic has stopped all the important activities of human beings. I experience frequent anxiety and apprehension of happening something very bad. I occasionally get panic. I sometimes feel extreme sadness and helplessness. The pandemic has affected my income seriously. I get depressed at the time when I think of my loss. My future has become uncertain and unpredictable. (F_2_NF)

Few of them described that the uncertainty and constant fear of COVID-19 have made them very cautious, alert and over-protective in all interpersonal and social interactions all the time (JF = 50.00%, NF = 84.62%). They observed that the insecurity and ambiguity arising out of the pandemic left us with no choice and freedom but to remain psychologically stuck with the prevention and confinement. Thus, a kind of pervasive helplessness and apprehensions was reported by them.

We have to think in advance about grocery and daily used items of home, the period is very uncertain, we

have to remain alert all the time that's a change in our behaviour. (M_2_JF)

The fear and restrictions of lockdown have made me helpless. I show extreme concerns with prevention. I have to wash my hands frequently. I feel compulsions to change my clothes whenever I return from outside. I wash everything I buy from the market. I fear that milkman may infect me. It seems that there is no way to live. Sometimes I feel that life will never get as normal as before. (M_3_NF)

The restrictions imposed after the outbreak of COVID-19 gave rise to a variety of problems and concerns which were not seen and faced in the past life of human beings. Different kinds of concerns related to loss of money, opportunities, life, health and autonomy (JF = 78.57%, NF = 92.31%) were described which caused difficulties and challenges in their coping.

We don't have ample space in our house, and seven members are there in my family, this lockdown has made our life hell, usually, members live in different cities, so earlier we didn't have much problem of space, now as all of us are young adults so it makes a real challenge for us. (M_9_JF)

There are very limited options for treasure, relish, that makes me upset. I am tired of watching television and fed up of the news on COVID-19. (M_8_NF)

The participants reported financial problems as one of the biggest loss during the restrictions of the pandemic. This loss was described as irrecoverable and severe.

Employees in the service sector are now unemployed due to corona, salary deduction is there, 50% of salary I am getting; so that makes it difficult to fulfil instalments, loan. And that will cause poor health in the long-term. Perhaps, the family plays an active role in the crisis. Joint family helped me; I believe those living in a nuclear family would have to face a mental break down during this period whereas I am in much better condition. (M_13_JF)

Corona has impacted my life in many ways, things are being delayed, and everything is closed due to lockdown, monetary issues. Shops are closed so there is a lack of flow of money. I had to take a loan from a bank, but now everything is closed. The things are delayed by 2-3 months. (F_13_NF)

A common threat, like a shared experience such as a pandemic, can profoundly influence family dynamics and religious practices in the long term. The shared adversity may strengthen familial bonds, fostering a collective resilience and a heightened sense of communal support. In terms of religious practices, it could lead to increased devotion, as communities seek solace and meaning in shared rituals. Alternatively, it might prompt a reassessment of religious beliefs in light of the crisis. Overall, a common threat has the potential to reshape both family dynamics and religious practices, influencing the way individuals perceive and engage with these aspects of their lives in the future.

Theme 2: Joint and nuclear families cultivated different values relevant for self-affirmation.

Collectivistic values are characterized by interdependence, cooperation, interdependent self-construal, selflessness social rules, prominence of community in place of individual needs, we-feeling, team spirit, the importance of family and community, supporting others and higher value for social contributions (JF = 85.71-100%). These values are cultivated prominently in a joint family system. Thus, these values are given

prominence in satisfying needs in normal life situations as well as unusual ones. Participants residing in the joint family have different expressions than with those residing in a nuclear family.

Helping mother and family members in household activities were the ways through which we spent our time during the lockdown. We have started cooking and that makes us feel good, we have tried different food recipes and got the chance to learn from our mother. This is the way we are engaged and spending time with my family. (F_10_JF)

We are spending quality time with our family, which we frequently used to crave for, now almighty has allowed us to enjoy this precious time with our family. (F_3_JF)

Family plays a strong role in consoling and supporting. Family plays an active role in increasing the confidence. (M_13_JF)

Individualistic values reflect independence self-construal, individual focus, uniqueness, achievement-orientation and self-reliance (NF = 92.31-100%). These values appear to be cultivated in nuclear families which were reflected in the verbalizations of the participants living in nuclear families. The following quotes reflect the same:

For me, a family has not much role to play in my life even during this crisis; it's only me who is going to help me in the long run. We were observing the restrictions to save others and ourselves. (M_10_NF)

I have to do all work by myself. It is good to stay at home. I can take care of myself. From the student days, I have been self-dependent. I have also to manage new job stress created by the pandemic. (F_12_NF)

In the beginning, there was fear prevailing all over but now somewhat better. Now I am searching for online jobs and I am sure that I will be able to manage my affairs. (M_8_NF)

Theme 3: Values of the joint family played a significant and positive role in self-affirmation leading to perceived positive outcomes.

Joint family is characterized by adherence to the collective values and living together with the members from three or more generations. With multiplicity of relationships, some compulsions to observe discipline and obedience, defined routines in life, a wider temporal dimension due to senior members and religious practices, the joint family was observed to make a comfortable space for their family members amidst extreme uncertainties and fear of COVID-19. Sharing, emotional bond, mutual understanding and mingling are more frequent in joint families due to some common discipline, sacrifice, multiple sources of entertainment and control by the elders (JF = 92.86-100%). As such these benefits were shared by the participants who were living in a joint family even in this pandemic period.

We are fortunate to have family in this critical time of life, we couldn't imagine our life without them; at least, we have got some people to bang on, to have a chit chat, to play, to tease, it is the only thing that is helping us to be functional in this critical period. (M_11_JF)

We hardly remember when we had last spent time with our family, now we can say we were unlucky but at present being present with parents and other siblings make us feel lighter and happier. Our parents and grandparents care for us even if we are enough old. (F_10_JF)

The interpersonal emotional bond, a system of care of younger by the elder, a focus on learning, the positive involvement of senior elders in children and constant watch in the form of love and affection ease the experience of learning enjoyable and rewarding (JF = 100%). These positive relational dynamics have been described as strengthening the abilities of the participants living with joint family.

My father and the whole family helped us in overcoming anxiety. My father is so calm, he made me realise the important aspects of my life that led us to focus and work on those fronts. (F_5_JF)

After the outbreak of the current pandemic, we were afraid at first. During the pandemic we didn't know that we were good in all those stuff, the trust and support of our family played a great role. We are grateful to our family and we really believe that a joint family is a kind of a blessing in one's life and we've experienced it personally during this COVID-19. God knows what would have happened if we had to live alone and stuck in COVID-19 situation far away from our family. (F_9_JF)

Strong emotional bond and rewarding relationships (JF = 100%) in a joint family have been the sources of protective strengths to face the distress caused by COVID-19.

The emotional bond of joint family is very helpful in facing the uncertainty and fear caused by the pandemic. This bond among siblings and other members of the family gives a sense of strong security. Children have many sources of learning and playing with grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. These relationships act as rich sources of happiness, play, positive engagement, mutuality, care, empathy and understanding. These attributes have strong sources of facing the odds of the pandemic. (M_12_JF)

The pandemic situation has created a strong fear and uncertainty in everything. It is the family that supported and protected us from the menace. This could become possible due to the positive values of mutuality, sharing, cooperation, interdependence safety and security of our family which never let us burdened of anything. (F_10_JF)

Unlike the joint family, the nuclear family cultivates individualistic values such as individual identity and independence, and focuses on self-esteem and personal accomplishments (NF = 92.31-100%). It is marked by limited relational resources, limited sharing, and constrained dynamics that have made it relatively more difficult to confront the distancing and confinement of the pandemic. These were described by a participant from a nuclear family as follows:

Facing the restrictions has now become very difficult for me. I couldn't walk and enjoy the street food. I miss a person to talk and gossip with. I used to play with my friends but the pandemic has made me idle and lazy. (M_9_NF)

In times of a pandemic crisis, the interplay between different family structures (joint and nuclear) and religious values significantly influences family adjustment and resilience. Joint families, with their collective ethos, may find strength in shared religious practices, fostering solidarity. However, conflicts may arise due to differing coping strategies within the close quarters. In nuclear families, individual autonomy may clash with communal religious expectations, potentially impacting emotional support. Shared religious beliefs can enhance coping mechanisms, but strict adherence might lead to tensions. The implications for family adjustment involve addressing

conflicts through open communication, fostering mutual understanding, and promoting flexibility in adapting religious practices. Balancing collective support with individual autonomy is crucial for resilience, highlighting the need for tailored interventions that respect diverse family and religious dynamics, ensuring families navigate the crisis with cohesion and adaptability.

Theme 4: Religious values have an explicit role in affirming values.

For Indians, there are four major goals of life or *Purusarthas* (object of human pursuit): *Dharma* (righteousness, moral values), *Artha* (prosperity, economic value), *Kama* (pleasure, psychological value) and *Moksha* (liberation, spiritual value). *Dharma* (religion is a close English synonym) represents duties, rights, laws, conduct and right ways of living. It is these religious values which are the chief sources to achieve the rest of the major life goals. The joint family is the main vehicle through which religion has to move on. It is the set of these religious values which determine ways of defining problems and solutions of human life. Thus, the joint family preserves religious beliefs and practices in India. These religious beliefs and practices are assumed to help achieve worldly and other-worldly and material as well as spiritual goals of human life (JF = 92.86-100%).

In Hindu religion, *Dharma* means a set of behaviours, beliefs and practices which make the life and universe possible. It is assumed to be pervasive and universal and binding to all. These values were described to help face the odds created by the outbreak of the COVID-19. Many participants observed peace in their life due to religious practices:

Although we used to worship God regularly, we never found that kind of peace which we are observing these days; it gives a feeling of completeness, we have started enjoying it, earlier it was an act or ritual to perform on daily basis, but now we are experiencing some difference. (F_7_JF)

The right way of living is one important value of religious practice in India which provides for the observance of healthy, restricted and spiritual life with equilibrium in other aspects of life (JF = 92.86-100%). *Bhakti* (devotion) is one method which helped achieve happiness, satisfaction and fulfilment;

Bhakti gives me immense pleasure and makes me temporarily forget about my problems and simultaneously gives me the required positivity in life to deal with the problems. (F_6_NF)

We get angry and frustrated, but many people are there to save us. Religious values were always present with us. It is not because of COVID. If there is an increase in faith or religious activities, then this is because the person is free all the time. (M_10_JF)

Beliefs and worshipping God are popular and well-accepted methods of living in the times of both happiness and sorrows (JF = 92.86-100%). Participants reported that they are regularly worshipping God many times a day.

The outbreak of the pandemic has caused great pain and apprehension. We went to the shelter of God. We involved ourselves in religious acts of praying and *Sadhana* (meditation). Regular meditation and prayer gave us immense protection and security. (M_14_JF)

I wake up at 5 am and perform *Puja* (worship) and *Sadhana* and after that, I start my day. It gives me a good feeling all day. It helps me in remaining calm during this stressful period all over the world. (F_4_NF)

In our religion (Hinduism), we tend to follow such rituals which are very hygienic and promote cleanliness and safety. For example, doing *Namaskar* (method of greeting) and taking a bath before preparing meals are practices which are prevalent in Indian culture. (F_6_JF)

The interaction of different family structures (joint and nuclear) and religious values during a pandemic can give rise to both synergy and conflict. In joint families, the collective orientation may strengthen communal support, enhancing resilience. However, conflicts may arise due to diverse individual needs within the joint structure. Nuclear families, emphasizing individualism, might navigate the crisis with more autonomy but could face challenges without the built-in familial support.

Religious values can either serve as a unifying force or a source of tension. Shared religious practices may bolster family cohesion, while differing beliefs might lead to conflicts. The implications for family adjustment and resilience lie in finding a delicate balance that honors diverse individual needs, fosters open communication, and respects religious differences. Strategies promoting understanding and flexibility can enhance family adaptation during times of crisis.

Theme 5: Traditional and modern religious beliefs and practices were observed with dissimilar implications for affirmation.

Joint family is the main vehicle of propagating religion in India. The basic religious values are expressed during the pandemic.

Subtheme 1: traditional religious beliefs and practices

Major religious values in India are idol worship, belief in the omnipresence of God, renunciation, liberal giving, dedication, truth, non-violence and self-control (JF = 78.57-100%). Some of these values were described as helpful in facing the odds of the pandemic.

We have started reading “*Ramayana, Mahabharat*” and other religious and spiritual literature and find it useful in today’s critical situation. It helps us in connecting with our roots. (M_5_JF)

One should believe in religion, but Corona as such has no power to increase or decrease our belief. We also believe that people are more attached to God and religious practices have increased now. (F_10_JF)

Subtheme 2: modern religious beliefs and practices

The participants living in nuclear families had different religious practices. They believed in more concrete aspects of religion which were assumed to be helpful in their life to enhance health and well-being (NF = 92.31-100%). They were described in the following quotes:

I hardly found that worshipping God will result in something; I prefer meditation hence on regular basis I engage in it. I practice 30 minutes of meditation every day and now trying to increase my meditation duration. I have seen that mediation is helpful and it helps in overcoming my anxiety. (F_11_NF)

As such I am not much religious but yes it helps. Anxiety is controlled by remembering about *Ishwar* (God). For example, my blood pressure is increasing so I try to engage in religious acts. But not religious I will say I am practising meditation. I used to pray regularly so this is not because of the pandemic, but yes earlier it was only specific for my wellbeing but not I think of the well-being of others too. Maybe this is due to Hindu philosophy of ‘*Vishwabandhutva*’ (universal

brotherhood), ‘*Viswa ka Kalyan*’ (welfare of the world) and ritual of reciting ‘*Vishwa ka Kalyan*’. (M_6_NF)

I don’t believe in religion, I believe in *karma*, in my family discipline plays an active role. I obey my mother and follow instructions of family members like “don’t go out”, wash your hands regularly. (F_2_NF)

Few others from nuclear families expressed that Yoga was helpful during this crisis for them. The participants believed that these practices helped preserve, protect and maintain good health and well-being (NF = 100%). This is the way of engaging themselves in religious practices.

I experience immense happiness and satisfaction whenever I do Yoga, earlier I used to do only few *Yoga Asanas* (postures) like ‘*Surya Namaskar*’, ‘*Anulom Vilom*’ and ‘*Kapalbhati*’ but now am performing several other *yoga Asanas*; this has made me more competent and contented. (F_2_NF)

During the stress of the pandemic, I found yoga and meditation to be very useful. I do not believe in these things more than that. They may help you to live a good life and remain physically and psychologically fit and sound. (M_3_NF)

DISCUSSION

The findings prove the contention that the outbreak of COVID-19 has created strong and unusual threats to the life of the participants, their family members and the whole community. The threats were perceived as severe and imposed a demand to activate values capable of protecting well-being and self-integrity. The threats may have been perceived by them due to the sudden, fatal, unknown and uncertain nature of the COVID-19 which created the situation like a crisis (Seeger et al., 1998). Previous studies have shown that a crisis in due course may increase tension, panic, helplessness and depression if not checked timely (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Yeager & Roberts, 2015). According to the Fight or Flight theory of Cannon, the threats reported by the participants in the forms of psychological symptoms may be due to the concordant physiological processes during the pandemic (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

The stress caused by the recent pandemic may have significantly affected the perceptual processes, coping responses and appraisal of coping outcomes (Leventhal et al., 1998). According to the Illness Perceptions Theory (Leventhal et al., 1998), the pandemic may have significantly disturbed the familiar normative guidelines of the identity, cause, timeline, consequences and curability of coronavirus disease known to the participants which, in turn, may have led them to perceive psychological distress and decreased positive life outcomes. The severity and novelty of the pandemic may have significantly impacted the self-efficacy of the participants. Self-Efficacy reflects a person’s beliefs in his abilities to accomplish a task in a given situation according to some accepted criteria significant to accomplish environmental demands and achieve desirable life outcomes (Bandura, 1977). The unusualness and strong uncertainties caused by COVID-19 may have seriously weakened the response efficacy and self-efficacy which, in turn, may have led them to experience a set of negative psychological symptoms (de Zwart et al., 2009). The similar psychological distress caused by the current pandemic such as stress, confusion, anger, restrictions, fear of infection, frustration, loss and stigma have also been observed in some recent studies

(Brooks et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2022). Drawing on these established psychological theories aids in explaining self-affirmation findings within joint and nuclear family settings. Attachment theory posits that family structures influence emotional security, impacting how individuals affirm themselves during crises. Social identity theory contributes by elucidating how familial and cultural contexts shape self-affirmation patterns. Additionally, the stress and coping framework illuminates the role of family support in bolstering self-affirmation. Integrating these theories helps unravel the complex interplay of psychological mechanisms within different family structures, offering a theoretical foundation to interpret findings and fostering a nuanced understanding of self-affirmation dynamics amidst diverse familial contexts.

The findings of the research reveal intriguing connections with the Fight or Flight theory and Illness Perceptions. Individuals in joint families tend to exhibit a collective "Fight" response, emphasizing mutual support and shared coping strategies, while those in nuclear families often lean towards an individualistic "Flight" response, relying more on personal autonomy. Moreover, illness perceptions within the family context differ; joint families may perceive health crises as collective challenges, influencing shared coping mechanisms. Comparatively, nuclear families might interpret illnesses through an individual lens. This nuanced understanding aligns with previous self-affirmation research, emphasizing the intricate interplay between familial structures, coping responses, and illness perceptions. The unique contribution lies in unravelling these dynamics in the context of joint and nuclear families during a crisis, shedding light on specific mechanisms that shape responses to health challenges within diverse family frameworks.

The usual personal values (previous medical knowledge, disease, symptoms and treatments etc.) did not seem to work due to novelty and uncertainty of the causes and consequences of the pandemic and, thus the participants lend support from familial and religious values with which they were well-familiar and apt. These values were well-known and admired in Indian society for long. Recent research also concluded that the Indian joint family is inconsistent, full of contradictions, context-sensitive and has a loose sense of boundaries (Narayan, 2019). Individuals in a joint family get synergized through healthy social interactions and during the lockdown, families are blessed with both and has shown more positive manifestation of care and share (Bhatt, 2020). A recent study in India has also suggested that a joint family where members of many generations live together under one roof have faced the lowest level of stress. It could become possible because the joint families enjoyed group activities and shared emotions like laughing together (Gautam, 2020). In the Indian context during the pandemic, family and religious values emerged as effective substitutes for traditional support systems. With lockdowns disrupting social connections, families provided essential emotional and practical assistance. Religious practices offered solace and a sense of purpose, compensating for the absence of communal activities. These dynamic contrasts with more individualistic societies where reliance on close-knit communities might be less pronounced. The cultural emphasis on familial and religious bonds in India uniquely positioned these values as robust substitutes, highlighting the distinctive role they played in providing support and resilience during the challenging circumstances of the pandemic.

The participants from nuclear and joint families differed in their familial and religious values that were well

reflected in their practice. Indian joint family system cultivates a set of peculiar collective values that may have more relevance for affirming the participants during the recent pandemic. The individualistic values are based on conditional sources of power and status which may have involved different mechanisms of affirmation while collectivistic values like compassion and service to others may be more conducive as they tend to be less conditional (Burson et al., 2012). The Indian joint family system has been known for cultivating social relationships of unconditional and transcendental nature (I can't live without my family and community), it may facilitate more affirmation in collective values in their members in the face of the recent threat (Shnabel et al., 2013).

The participants from the nuclear families showed reliance on individual-focused values of self-reliance, self-compassion whereas those who valued joint family reflected upon the significance of cooperation, interdependence, and compassion. Thus, affirming in the relevant values, beliefs and roles as well engaging themselves with the appropriate activities (spending time with their family members, engaging in religious practices etc.) might have helped them to affirm in their desirable values. This affirmation in the relevant values or actions helped them to cope up with the threat created by COVID-19. As the threat was serious and unavoidable, the activation of self-affirmation in familial and religious values was natural. Major religious values which were observed in the reporting of the participants were love, gratitude, goodness, humanism, sacrifice, self-control, commitment and transcendence. It has been suggested that self-affirmation primarily occurs when the threat belongs to an important area of individuals (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

Some previous researchers have argued that engaging in an activity promotes specific values, beliefs and roles pertinent to the identity of individuals and facilitate self-integrity and worth (Cohen & Sherman, 2007). The affirmation in the most desirable values of individuals broadens their perception about their identity to a larger perspective that in turn, shifts attention from the current threat and reduced their use of defences and act more effectively (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). It has been argued that self-affirmation may get activated either through reflecting up relevant roles, values and beliefs or engaging in positive activities. Many mechanisms have been proposed to explain the positive effects of self-affirmation. It has been suggested that self-affirmation acts as a buffer against stress by changing the psychological and physiological processes (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Creswell et al., 2013). Another view says that self-affirmation reduces defensiveness and thus, makes available more psychological resources to deal with the threat (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

The affirmation in values inherent especially in joint family and traditional religious practices to face the recent threat may be significant as self-affirmation has been suggested to cultivate positive mood (Ferrer et al., 2012), collective self-esteem (Armitage, 2012), cognitive processing, other-directed feeling and connectedness with others (Burson et al., 2012). The participants belonging to the nuclear families and believed in practising evident components of religion showed affirmation in values confined to their personal experiences and outcomes. It may be due to the fact the two groups may have perceived different benefits of belonging to the two values and showed different mechanisms of self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). The collectivists affirm easily regarding family, interdependence and religion whereas individuals

having individualistic-orientation show preferences for values relevant for their personal self (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2004).

The coexistence of individualism and collectivism in India may be possible due to its situation in the transition period. This coexistence of the two cultural value systems may be argued to be working behind the simultaneous presence of independent and interdependent self-affirmations as has been suggested by earlier research (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). This study is one of the limited studies which simultaneously showed an initial clue of the coexistence and functioning of independent and interdependent self-affirmation. According to the concept of cognitive polyphasia, different and conflicting views can exist within a culture, group, or even within an individual (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernández, 2015). More studies are needed to verify their dynamics and relationships with the various life outcomes of people. It would be interesting to see in future research whether joint family affiliation will continue to be an asset to self-affirmation as people need to be careful not to infect their loved ones in everyday situations of high density and increased spread of the virus in the near future COVID-19 phase, i.e., the period that followed the lockdown.

It may be argued that mass adherence to the restrictions of lockdown and quarantine may not be observed only through the efforts of governmental efforts in India where people claim their identity to multiple sources and differ in their ethnicity, religious beliefs and political ideologies. It could become possible since the majority of the Indians realized and sought help and support from their joint families which are known for their collective values and traditional religious practices. On the other hand, there is a significant portion of the Indian people who are away from their joint families and living nuclear families to avail better educational, employment and other positive prospects. The life of such people is heavily affected by postmodern lifestyle, materialistic values, mass media and modern professionalism.

The study is not without limitations. The recruitment of the participants from Hindu religion, small age range, and some select geographical parts were some of the major limitations. The study findings are based on telephonic interview call, which may lack liveliness of the face-to-face interview and thus, may limit the generalizability of the findings. The interviews were originally conducted in Hindi, and they were translated

into English. Thus, there is a chance that some important meaning may have lost in this process. Since, study is based on a particular cultural group of participants, future generalizations need precautions. There is a lot of scope to get involved in this area. Future research could uncover the culture-specific nature and mechanisms of self-affirmation and its role in initiating positive behaviour changes in larger groups. It can help persuade people to accept social policies aimed at eradicating poverty, illiteracy, corruption and violence. It can help motivate people to adopt a healthy lifestyle to increase their well-being. With the help of these insights, more community and political participation can be created. Understanding the dynamics of self-affirmation can facilitate the development of positive national character and intergroup harmony on the one hand, and reduce local, regional, national, and international conflicts on the other.

The study's limitations include a potentially homogeneous sample, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings. If the sample is not representative of diverse demographics, interpretations may not fully capture the broader population's

experiences. Additionally, relying on specific data collection methods might introduce bias or overlook nuanced aspects. Future research should prioritize diverse participant recruitment, considering factors like age, socio-economic background, and regional variations. Employing mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative data, can offer a more comprehensive understanding. Further, incorporating longitudinal designs can capture the evolving nature of self-affirmation over time. Acknowledging and addressing these limitations enhances the study's robustness, ensuring findings are more broadly applicable and fostering a more nuanced understanding of self-affirmation in diverse cultural and familial contexts.

The findings of the study have shown that behaviours of the individuals living in two different family systems were shaped significantly by their dissimilar adherence to two sets of values and practices. The insights of the current study may be helpful when changes in behaviours and opinions of people on a larger scale are essential to make them adhere to social, health and educational policies meant for modern development and progress. Besides, the findings may be helpful to understand the causes behind the failures of the past similar policies. It makes a point that change in behaviours of people is possible, stable and effective only when the direction of the change is in the consonance to their preferred values. Thus, the findings may have theoretical, practical and policy implications especially for developing societies to understand intergenerational and intergroup relationships and outcomes for larger groups and collectives.

The self-affirmation findings hold valuable implications for policy development in health, education, and social sectors. Understanding how family and religious practices influence individual well-being during crises can inform targeted health interventions, emphasizing culturally sensitive approaches. In education, recognizing the impact of diverse familial structures on self-affirmation can guide the creation of supportive environments. Social policies can benefit by integrating insights into familial and religious dynamics to enhance community resilience. Tailoring interventions based on these findings ensures policies are more effective, acknowledging and respecting the diverse cultural contexts within which individuals navigate self-affirmation, ultimately promoting holistic well-being across various societal domains.

The study on self-affirmation offers valuable insights for developing interventions during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding how familial structures and religious practices influence self-affirmation allows for tailored interventions. For joint families, emphasizing collective support can enhance resilience, while interventions for nuclear families may focus on bolstering individual coping mechanisms. Addressing the nuances of religious values ensures culturally sensitive approaches. By acknowledging the diverse dynamics impacting self-affirmation, interventions can effectively promote well-being during crises, providing a nuanced and context-specific framework for individuals and families navigating challenging circumstances.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study significantly contributes to our understanding of individual and collective self-affirmation in the Indian cultural context during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. By unravelling the intricate dynamics within joint and nuclear families and examining the role of

religious values, this study expands the theoretical framework of self-affirmation. The findings provide nuanced insights into how familial and cultural factors shape coping mechanisms, influencing the resilience of individuals and families. This contribution is crucial in bridging the gap between theoretical understanding and practical interventions. Recognizing the unique interplay of self-affirmation within diverse family structures and religious practices enables the development of culturally sensitive strategies to enhance well-being. Ultimately, this research not only enriches academic literature but also informs policymakers and practitioners, offering a holistic perspective for tailored interventions in the Indian cultural landscape.

The study also advances our understanding of how familial structures and religious values influence coping mechanisms during crises, particularly in the unique cultural landscape of India. The findings contribute nuanced insights to the existing literature by unravelling the interplay between joint and nuclear family dynamics, religious practices, and self-affirmation. This study underscores the cultural specificity of self-affirmation in India, emphasizing the role of collective resilience and individual coping within diverse family contexts. The implications for theory lie in enriching frameworks like attachment theory and social identity theory, while the practical implications underscore the importance of culturally sensitive interventions. Tailored strategies acknowledging the multifaceted nature of self-affirmation in the Indian context are essential for promoting well-being, offering a comprehensive approach to navigate the complexities of individual and collective responses during crises.

DECLARATION

Data Availability Statement

The data may be provided on a genuine request.

Funding/Financial Support

The authors received no funding for this study.

Acknowledgements

There is no support to report.

Ethical Approval Statement

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Doctor Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, 470003, Madhya Pradesh, India. The institutional ethical approval number is DHSGV/IEC/2021/9.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Pre-registration

The study was pre-registered with the following reference:

Tiwari, G. K., Pandey, R., & Rai, P. K. (2020). Independent and Interdependent Self-affirmations in Action: Understanding their dynamics in India during COVID-19. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/HW3CU>

Preprint

An earlier version of the manuscript is available as a preprint with the following details:

Pandey, R., Tiwari, G. K., & Rai, P. K. (2020). *The Independent and Interdependent Self-affirmations in Action: Understanding their dynamics in India during*

COVID-19.

Preprints.

<https://doi.org/10.22541/au.158958018.83880224>

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