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Whose Values Matter in Family Higher-Education Decisions? Actor, Partner, and Value-Congruence Effects in 801 Parent–Student Dyads

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Abstract

Background: International higher-education decisions are often negotiated within families, but research rarely separates the association of a person's own values with their decision psychology from the association of a family member's values or the degree of value congruence between them.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey produced 801 linked Indian parent–student dyads (1,602 respondents) engaged in international higher-education decisions. Parents and students completed the Security–Status–Freedom Orientation Scale and measures of Decision Clarity and Decision Strain. Role-specific actor–partner models estimated actor and partner associations; pooled interaction models tested role differences; and polynomial regression with response surface analysis, supplemented by discrepancy-controlled models, tested value-congruence effects.

Results: Parent–student correspondence was weak for Security, Status, and Freedom ($r = .15–.18$) and non-significant for Decision Clarity and Decision Strain. Ten of twelve actor coefficients were significant, whereas none of twelve partner coefficients was significant. Models explained 14.0%–33.1% of outcome variance. Actor–partner patterns did not differ significantly by role. Across twelve response-surface models, nonlinear and cross-product terms added negligible explanatory power beyond linear terms (mean $\Delta R^2 = .003$; all nested $p \geq .16$). One of twelve discrepancy coefficients was nominally significant but did not survive correction for multiple testing.

Conclusions: In this cross-sectional self-report study, each family member's contemporaneous decision clarity and strain were associated more strongly with their own values than with the other member's values or value congruence. The findings do not establish that family influence is absent; rather, they indicate that direct cross-partner associations were small in this design and that value disagreement alone was not a reliable marker of decision strain.

Background

International higher-education choice is usually modelled as a sequence of predisposition, search, and choice shaped by personal background, institutional attributes, perceived costs, and expected benefits [1, 2, 3]. Push–pull accounts extend this logic across national borders by locating mobility within economic, social, political, and institutional conditions in origin and destination countries [4]. Recent work nevertheless shows that educational decisions remain socially embedded: applicants respond to advice from significant others [5], parental preferences can alter intended tertiary pathways [6], and international students exercise agency within rather than outside family and structural constraints [7].

For many families, studying abroad is a jointly financed and emotionally consequential decision. Parents may evaluate risk, affordability, employability, safety, and social recognition, while students must live with the educational, relational, and identity consequences. Family involvement can therefore provide information and support while also creating competing expectations. Research on family support in higher education similarly describes parents as sources of practical and symbolic support whose

expectations may enable or complicate student decision-making [8]. The psychological question is not simply whether parents matter, but how a parent's and a student's distinct value priorities relate to each person's clarity and strain while the decision is being made.

A dyadic design is needed to distinguish three possibilities: a person's decision psychology may be associated mainly with their own values (an actor effect), with the linked family member's values (a partner effect), or with the pattern of agreement and disagreement between them (a congruence effect). The present study examines these possibilities in 801 linked parent–student dyads from India, using role-specific actor–partner models and polynomial response surface analysis. The design permits a direct test of whether apparent family influence is better represented by each member's own psychological orientation, by cross-partner associations, or by value congruence.

Family decision-making in higher education

College-choice and international-mobility frameworks explain which attributes families evaluate, but they are less suited to separating whose psychological orientation predicts each family member's experience of the decision. Research on social class and educational choice has long shown that the set of options regarded as realistic is produced within families rather than by an isolated applicant [9]. More recent evidence also indicates that rankings, recommendations, and parental preferences influence how students interpret available pathways [5, 6]. At the same time, contemporary work on international student agency cautions against reducing students to passive recipients of family or institutional pressures [7]. A dyadic psychological account should therefore allow family interdependence and individual agency to coexist.

Relational autonomy and family interdependence

The coexistence of parental involvement and student agency is especially relevant during late adolescence and emerging adulthood. The autonomous-related self framework treats autonomy and family relatedness as compatible rather than mutually exclusive [10], and developmental research similarly rejects the assumption that normative autonomy requires detachment from parents [11]. Cross-cultural research with university students further suggests that high parental involvement can have different meanings depending on whether it is experienced as supportive, intrusive, or relationally coherent [12]. These perspectives imply that parent and student values may correspond without becoming identical, and that each member may retain a distinct emotional response to a shared decision.

Security, status, and freedom as decision-relevant values

The present study organizes decision-relevant values around Security, Status, and Freedom. Security captures safety, stability, employability, and risk reduction, connecting with career-decision difficulty and

uncertainty management [13, 14]. Status captures prestige, rankings, reputation, and social recognition, consistent with accounts of educational credentials as cultural and positional capital [15, 16, 17]. Freedom captures autonomy, exploration, flexibility, and self-authorship, drawing on self-determination theory and career-construction perspectives [18, 19, 20]. These orientations are domain-specific rather than direct substitutes for Schwartz's universal value dimensions, although Security is conceptually adjacent to conservation, Status to achievement and power, and Freedom to self-direction and openness to change [21]. Recent longitudinal and intensive research reinforces that values continue to differentiate during adolescence and are meaningfully related to well-being and valued action, while also showing that such associations vary by value content and level of analysis [22, 23, 24].

Value transmission and congruence within families

Family systems theory treats the family as an interdependent unit, while value-transmission research describes correspondence as selective rather than automatic [25, 26]. Internalization depends on how accurately children perceive parental values and whether they accept them voluntarily [27], and parent–child value congruence varies with developmental and identity processes [28]. Recent evidence remains mixed about whether value similarity is uniformly beneficial. Parent–adolescent congruence in materialism has been associated with subjective well-being [29], and perceived congruence between parents has recently been linked to lower youth anxiety and clearer family communication for some value domains [30]. A broader review, however, concludes that value-similarity effects are conditional on the value, outcome, and whether congruence is actual or perceived [31]. These findings make congruence an empirical question rather than a default assumption.

Dyadic and congruence analysis

The actor–partner interdependence model (APIM) separates actor and partner associations while respecting the linked nature of dyadic observations [32]. Congruence requires a different but complementary approach. Difference scores and absolute-distance indices collapse two component scores and can impose restrictive assumptions that are not visible in the resulting coefficient [33, 34]. Polynomial regression with response surface analysis retains both scores, their squares, and their cross-product, allowing the shape of agreement and disagreement to be tested rather than presumed [35]. Methodological extensions have adapted response-surface analysis for nested data [36], and recent parent–adolescent studies demonstrate its relevance to discrepant family perceptions and psychological outcomes [37, 38]. Because a non-significant p-value alone does not establish the absence of an effect, confidence intervals and changes in explained variance are needed to show which effect magnitudes the data can reasonably exclude [39].

Measurement and inferential constraints

Two constraints are central to interpretation. First, actor predictors and actor outcomes are reported by the same respondent at the same occasion, whereas partner predictors come from a different respondent. Shared method and response style can therefore strengthen actor associations relative to partner associations [40]. Second, role comparisons assume that the measures function comparably for parents and students. Reliability is necessary but not sufficient for such comparisons; full measurement-invariance testing would provide stronger evidence that constructs have equivalent meaning across roles [41, 42, 43]. The present study reports role-specific reliability and treats mean-level comparisons and null role differences cautiously because a multi-group confirmatory factor analysis was not available.

The present study

The study addressed four research questions. RQ1 asked how strongly parents and students within the same family corresponded on Security, Status, Freedom, Decision Clarity, and Decision Strain. RQ2 asked whether each outcome was associated with actor values, partner values, or both, and whether the actor–partner pattern differed between parent and student roles. RQ3 asked whether the pattern of parent–student value congruence or incongruence explained either member's outcomes beyond the two linear component scores. RQ4 tested whether simpler discrepancy-controlled models converged with the response-surface results. Because the analyses were not preregistered, these questions are presented as theory-guided but not confirmatory hypotheses.

Methods

Design, Participants, and Procedure

This cross-sectional, anonymous, self-administered online survey was conducted in February 2026 with Indian respondents engaged in international higher-education decisions. Participants were recruited through an international education counselling practice and associated education networks. Parent and student responses were linked using a participant-generated family code that contained no names, telephone numbers, or other direct identifiers. The full survey included 1,802 respondents (1,001 students and 801 parents). The present analysis used the 801 complete parent–student dyads (1,602 respondents); 200 students without a linked parent response were excluded from dyadic analyses. No prospective power calculation was conducted because the analysis used all available complete dyads; precision is reported through 95% confidence intervals and model-comparison statistics.

Table 1 summarizes the paired sample. Students averaged 18.6 years (SD = 2.0); gender was close to evenly split (50.3% female, 45.9% male, 3.8% another gender or preferred not to say). The largest single decision-stage group was "applying" (36.0%), followed by "enrolled" (29.6%); intended destinations were led by the USA (30.8%) and UK (26.8%). The linked parent respondents averaged 48.5 years (SD = 4.1), with gender again close to evenly split (49.8% female, 47.1% male, 3.1% another gender or preferred not to say). The survey did not ask parents to specify their relationship to the student (e.g., mother, father, or

another guardian) or capture education level or household income, so the sample cannot be described on these dimensions; this is noted as a limitation in the Limitations section

Characteristic	Paired students (n=801)	Paired parents (n=801)	Unpaired students (n=200)
Age, M (SD)	18.57 (2.01)	48.48 (4.13)	comparable (ns diff., p=.542)
Gender: female / male / other	50.3% / 45.9% / 3.8%	49.8% / 47.1% / 3.1%	—
Decision stage: applying	36.0%	34.3%	comparable (ns diff., p=.232)
Decision stage: enrolled	29.6%	27.1%	—
Decision stage: considering	16.5%	20.6%	—
Decision stage: offer-holding	13.2%	12.4%	—
Decision stage: completed	4.7%	5.6%	—
Top destination: USA / UK	30.8% / 26.8%	32.7% / 24.3%	—

Table 1. Sample characteristics for the 801 paired dyads (students and their linked parents), with comparison of paired to the 200 unpaired students excluded from the dyadic analysis. Decision stage and intended destination are each respondent's own report and were not required to match within a dyad. Relationship-to-student (mother/father/other guardian), parent education, and household income were not captured by the survey instrument.

Ethics and Consent

The study was approved, prior to data collection, by the Zigma Six Ethics Board, Mumbai, India — an ethics committee registered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Human Research Protections (IRB registration number IRB00015192; Federalwide Assurance FWA00036459) — under study approval number SS/2026/001-17. Adult participants provided electronically recorded informed consent before participation; participants younger than 18 years provided assent, with parental or guardian consent. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Measures

Value orientations were measured with the 30-item Security–Status–Freedom Orientation Scale (SSF-OS; 10 items per subscale; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Representative Security items

were “It is important to me that studying abroad leads to a stable, secure career” and “I prefer universities and countries that feel safe and low-risk.” Status items included “Attending a highly ranked university is important to me” and “The reputation or brand of the university strongly influences my choice.” Freedom items included “I want the independence to make my own choices about my future” and “I value the chance to live and think independently.” Decision Clarity and Decision Strain were each measured with four items. The SSF-OS measurement model is reported in a related scale-development manuscript, but the present study does not rely on that manuscript for interpretation: item examples and sample-specific reliability are reported here, and the absence of role-based measurement-invariance testing is treated as a limitation.

Table 2 reports Cronbach’s alpha separately for the full sample and for linked parents and students. All scales showed acceptable to good internal consistency in each subgroup (α = .81–.87). Alpha is reported as an index of internal consistency rather than evidence of unidimensionality or construct validity [44].

Scale	Items	α (full sample)	α (students, n=801)	α (parents, n=801)
Security	10	.869	.862	.869
Status	10	.824	.814	.829
Freedom	10	.848	.849	.851
Decision Clarity	4	.838	.834	.840
Decision Strain	4	.868	.864	.868

Table 2. Internal consistency (Cronbach's α) by scale and subsample.

Analytic Strategy

Analyses were conducted in Python using pandas, SciPy, statsmodels, and scikit-learn. No simulated or imputed observations were used. First, dyadic Pearson correlations and paired-sample t-tests described within-family correspondence and mean differences. Second, values and outcomes were standardized against the full N = 1,802 sample for comparability. Third, distinguishable-dyad actor–partner associations were estimated as separate role-specific regression equations with HC3 robust standard errors: each person’s outcome was regressed on their own Security, Status, and Freedom scores and the linked partner’s corresponding scores. Because each role-specific equation contained one observation per family, there was no residual within-equation clustering. Fourth, pooled models with family-clustered standard errors tested the six role-by-predictor interactions jointly for each outcome. Fifth, twelve polynomial response-surface models (three value domains × two outcomes × two roles) entered centered parent score, centered student score, both squared terms, and their cross-product. Each model reported component coefficients, 95% confidence intervals, surface parameters, variance-inflation factors, and a nested F-test comparing the full polynomial model with the two-term linear model. Sixth,

discrepancy-controlled models regressed each person's outcome on their own values and the absolute parent–student discrepancy for each domain. The discrepancy analyses were treated as supplementary and evaluated using a Bonferroni-adjusted threshold across twelve coefficients. Across all analyses, effect estimates and confidence intervals were emphasized over isolated significance decisions.

Use of generative AI in manuscript preparation: OpenAI's ChatGPT was used to assist with language editing and structural reorganization of the manuscript. It was not used to generate data or statistical results. The author independently verified the references, analytic descriptions, numerical results, and substantive claims and accepts full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Results

Dyadic Correspondence (RQ1)

Parents and students showed weak-to-modest, statistically significant positive correlations on all three value orientations: Security, $r(799) = .154$, $p < .001$; Status, $r(799) = .166$, $p < .001$; Freedom, $r(799) = .182$, $p < .001$. Neither decision outcome showed detectable within-family correspondence: Decision Clarity, $r(799) = .047$, $p = .188$; Decision Strain, $r(799) = .019$, $p = .590$. Parents scored significantly higher than students on Security (mean difference = 0.184, paired $t(800) = 5.18$, $p < .001$, $dz = 0.18$) and on Status (mean difference = 0.254, paired $t(800) = 7.92$, $p < .001$, $dz = 0.28$), but not on Freedom (mean difference = 0.012, paired $t(800) = 0.34$, $p = .735$, $dz = 0.01$). Mean absolute within-dyad discrepancy was substantial on every subscale (0.76 to 0.81 scale points on a 1–5 metric), indicating that individual families frequently disagreed by a non-trivial margin even where average levels were similar. Table 3 reports the dyadic correlations and parent–student mean-level differences in full.

Measure	Dyadic r	Mean diff. (P–S)	Mean |diff.|	Paired t	dz	p
Security	.154 ***	0.184	0.807	5.18	0.18	< .001
Status	.166 ***	0.254	0.760	7.92	0.28	< .001
Freedom	.182 ***	0.012	0.791	0.34	0.01	.735
Decision Clarity	.047 (ns)	—	—	—	—	—
Decision Strain	.019 (ns)	—	—	—	—	—

*Table 3. Dyadic correlations and parent–student mean-level differences (N = 801 dyads). *** p < .001; ns = not significant; dz = standardized paired-samples effect size.*

Table 4 reports descriptive statistics and within-role correlations among the three value orientations and two outcomes, separately for students and parents, on the raw (unstandardized) 1–5 metric. Within both roles, Security correlated most strongly with Decision Strain (students r = .51; parents r = .49), and Freedom correlated most strongly, and negatively, with Security (students r = -.15; parents r = -.19) and positively with Decision Clarity (students r = .35; parents r = .41). These within-person patterns are

consistent with, and provide the raw-correlation basis for, the role-specific regression coefficients reported in Table 5; none of the value-orientation intercorrelations exceeded r = .30, consistent with the low collinearity (VIF ≤ 1.23) reported for the polynomial predictors in the response-surface results

	Security	Status	Freedom	Clarity	Strain	M (SD)
Student Security	—	.30	-.15	.02	.51	2.99 (0.77)
Student Status		—	.21	.18	.36	2.94 (0.69)
Student Freedom			—	.35	-.15	2.93 (0.76)
Student Clarity				—	-.01	2.90 (0.94)
Student Strain					—	2.84 (0.97)
Parent Security	—	.28	-.19	.06	.49	3.17 (0.78)
Parent Status		—	.22	.22	.35	3.19 (0.71)
Parent Freedom			—	.41	-.21	2.94 (0.77)
Parent Clarity				—	-.04	2.94 (0.94)
Parent Strain					—	3.05 (0.98)

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and within-role Pearson correlations among value orientations and outcomes, computed separately for the 801 paired students (upper block) and 801 paired parents (lower block), on the raw 1–5 item-mean metric.

Role-Specific Actor–Partner Interdependence Models (RQ2)

Table 5 reports the role-specific models, estimated as fully separate equations for students and parents. For students, Decision Clarity was predicted significantly by own Status (b = 0.10, p = .008) and strongly by own Freedom (b = 0.34, p < .001), but not significantly by own Security (b = 0.04, p = .227); none of the three parent (partner) scores were significant predictors of student Clarity. For students, Decision Strain was predicted significantly by all three own-value orientations — Security (b = 0.41, p < .001) and Status (b = 0.29, p < .001) positively, Freedom (b = −0.14, p < .001) negatively — while none of the three parent (partner) scores reached significance. For parents, Decision Clarity was predicted significantly by all three own-value orientations (Security b = 0.11, p = .002; Status b = 0.11, p = .003; Freedom b = 0.40, p < .001), and Decision Strain likewise by all three (Security b = 0.37, Status b = 0.28, both p < .001 and positive; Freedom b = −0.19, p < .001), while none of the three student (partner) scores were significant predictors of either parent outcome. Models explained 14.0% to 33.1% of outcome variance, using only actor and (null) partner terms.

Predictor	Student Clarity	Student Strain	Parent Clarity	Parent Strain
Own Security	0.043 [-0.03, 0.11], p=.227	0.408 [0.35, 0.47], p<.001	0.114 [0.04, 0.18], p=.002	0.374 [0.31, 0.44], p<.001
Own Status	0.101 [0.03, 0.17], p=.008	0.285 [0.22, 0.35], p<.001	0.105 [0.04, 0.17], p=.003	0.275 [0.21, 0.34], p<.001
Own Freedom	0.344 [0.28, 0.41], p<.001	-0.138 [-0.20, -0.08], p<.001	0.400 [0.34, 0.46], p<.001	-0.193 [-0.26, -0.13], p<.001
Partner Security	0.028 [-0.04, 0.10], p=.433	0.005 [-0.06, 0.07], p=.866	-0.007 [-0.08, 0.06], p=.847	0.000 [-0.06, 0.06], p=.996
Partner Status	-0.044 [-0.11, 0.03], p=.210	-0.054 [-0.11, 0.01], p=.081	-0.023 [-0.09, 0.04], p=.496	0.027 [-0.04, 0.09], p=.396
Partner Freedom	-0.009 [-0.08, 0.06], p=.793	-0.019 [-0.08, 0.04], p=.502	0.031 [-0.04, 0.10], p=.358	-0.009 [-0.07, 0.05], p=.778
R^2 / n	.140 / 801	.331 / 801	.201 / 801	.323 / 801

Table 5. Role-specific actor–partner models, fully separate equations for students and parents: standardized b [95% CI], p, HC3 standard errors (n = 801 per model).

Because Table 5 estimates parent and student equations separately, its coefficients cannot on their own establish whether the actor–partner pattern genuinely differs by role — some coefficients that are significant in one equation and not the other (for example, own Security predicting Clarity: significant for parents, not for students) could reflect a real role difference or could simply reflect sampling variability around a common underlying pattern. To adjudicate this directly, a pooled model with the full set of six role-by-predictor interaction terms was fitted, and a joint Wald test was conducted on all six interactions simultaneously, separately for each outcome. Neither omnibus test found evidence that the actor–partner pattern differs significantly between parents and students: Decision Clarity, $F(6, 800) = 0.94$, $p = .469$; Decision Strain, $F(6, 800) = 1.00$, $p = .425$. This does not prove the roles are identical — a null joint test is not proof of exact equality — but it means the data provide no statistical basis for treating parents and students as following different actor–partner processes; the role-specific equations in Table 5 are reported in full for transparency, and the pooled, role-dummy-only specification used in the abstract's variance-explained figures is statistically defensible rather than merely assumed.

Response Surface Analysis (RQ3)

Twelve response-surface models were fitted (three subscales × two outcomes × two roles), each with parent and student scores grand-mean-centered before computing quadratic and cross-product terms. Table 6 summarizes the key diagnostic for each: the linear sum-of-slopes parameter (a1), the change in R^2 from adding the three nonlinear/cross-product terms — the squared parent term, the squared student term, and their cross-product — relative to the two-term linear (additive) model (ΔR^2), with the corresponding nested F-test (3 numerator degrees of freedom, 795 denominator degrees of freedom in

every model) and its p-value, and the maximum variance-inflation factor among the five polynomial predictors. Centering kept multicollinearity low in every model (all VIF ≤ 1.23, well under conventional concern thresholds). In every one of the twelve models, without exception, ΔR^2 was small (0.000 to 0.006) and the nested F-test comparing the full polynomial model against the linear-only model was non-significant (all $p \geq .16$), meaning that in no case did the quadratic and cross-product terms — the parameters that specifically index congruence and incongruence beyond a simple additive combination of the two scores — improve model fit beyond what the two linear (actor and partner) terms already explained. Full coefficient tables, all four surface parameters (a1–a4) with standard errors and confidence intervals, and complete VIF diagnostics for all twelve models are reported in Supplementary Tables S1–S12; as an illustration, the Security-to-student-Strain model had a1 = 0.65, 95% CI [0.55, 0.75], $p < .001$, and its component coefficients show this was carried almost entirely by the student's own Security slope ($b = 0.653$, $p < .001$) rather than the parent's ($b = -0.003$, $p = .941$); its nested F-test for the three nonlinear/cross-product terms was $F(3, 795) = 0.68$, $p = .563$ — a pattern of a significant linear term and a non-significant nonlinear increment that recurs across all twelve models.

Subscale, outcome, role	a1 (linear)	a1 p	ΔR^2	Nested F	F p	Max VIF
Security, Strain, student	0.650	< .001	.002	0.68	.563	1.10
Security, Clarity, student	0.020	.725	.006	1.50	.212	1.10
Security, Strain, parent	0.639	< .001	.005	1.71	.163	1.10
Security, Clarity, parent	0.041	.471	.004	0.96	.411	1.10
Status, Strain, student	0.433	< .001	.000	0.08	.970	1.23
Status, Clarity, student	0.204	.001	.002	0.52	.669	1.23
Status, Strain, parent	0.497	< .001	.001	0.15	.928	1.23
Status, Clarity, parent	0.267	< .001	.001	0.35	.787	1.23
Freedom, Strain, student	-0.232	< .001	.002	0.51	.677	1.14
Freedom, Clarity, student	0.415	< .001	.005	1.40	.241	1.14
Freedom, Strain, parent	-0.281	< .001	.003	0.84	.472	1.14
Freedom, Clarity, parent	0.525	< .001	.001	0.39	.760	1.14

Table 6. Response surface summary across all twelve models (n = 801 each). a1 = sum of linear parent + student slopes (the actor+partner linear combination; interpretation as actor- or partner-driven requires inspecting the underlying component coefficients, reported in full in Supplementary Tables S1–S12). ΔR^2 = change in R^2 from the two-term linear model to the full five-term polynomial (quadratic + cross-product) model; every nested F-test has 3 numerator and 795 denominator degrees of freedom. No model's nested F-test reached $p < .05$.

Discrepancy-Controlled Actor Models (RQ4)

Table 7 reports actor-only regressions, estimated separately for students and parents, in which each person's own outcome was predicted from their own value scores plus the absolute discrepancy between their own and their partner's score on each subscale. Across the resulting twelve discrepancy coefficients (three subscales × two outcomes × two roles), eleven were non-significant, with confidence intervals in every case excluding all but small standardized effects. One coefficient reached significance: for students, Security discrepancy was weakly and positively associated with Decision Clarity (b = 0.095, 95% CI [0.01, 0.18], p = .022) — net of the student's own Security score, a larger gap between the student's and parent's Security scores was associated with slightly higher, not lower, clarity. This is the only discrepancy effect to reach significance across twelve tests in this analysis, runs opposite to a simple congruence-helps hypothesis, and does not survive a Bonferroni correction for twelve comparisons (corrected α = .0042); it is reported for completeness and interpreted with caution in the congruence discussion

Discrepancy term	Student Strain	Student Clarity	Parent Strain	Parent Clarity
|Security discrepancy|	0.015 [-0.05, 0.08], p=.660	0.095 [0.01, 0.18], p=.022*	0.035 [-0.04, 0.11], p=.346	-0.036 [-0.12, 0.05], p=.428
|Status discrepancy|	-0.029 [-0.10, 0.04], p=.430	0.053 [-0.03, 0.14], p=.227	-0.023 [-0.10, 0.05], p=.544	0.016 [-0.06, 0.09], p=.684
|Freedom discrepancy|	-0.037 [-0.11, 0.03], p=.297	-0.021 [-0.11, 0.07], p=.635	0.002 [-0.07, 0.08], p=.955	-0.003 [-0.08, 0.08], p=.944

*Table 7. Discrepancy-controlled actor models (own value scores + |parent-student discrepancy| predicting own outcome), estimated separately for students and parents (n = 801 each). * p < .05.*

Discussion

Families Correspond on Values, but Only Weakly

Parents and students corresponded reliably but weakly on Security, Status, and Freedom. The correlations of .15–.18 are consistent with a family-transmission process that is partial rather than deterministic. They also fit contemporary developmental accounts in which values continue to differentiate during adolescence and emerging adulthood [22]. Parents scored somewhat higher on Security and Status, although these mean comparisons should remain secondary because measurement invariance across roles was not established. The more important dyadic finding is that families often differed meaningfully even when group means were similar.

Decision Psychology Is Actor-Dominant, and This Does Not Differ Detectably by Role

The central result was the contrast between actor and partner coefficients. Ten of twelve actor coefficients were significant, whereas none of twelve partner coefficients was significant, and the confidence intervals generally excluded more than small cross-partner associations. A joint interaction test did not show that this overall pattern differed between parents and students. This result complements research emphasizing student agency within social and family constraints [7]: parents and students can participate in the same decision while retaining distinct contemporaneous psychological responses.

The finding should not be interpreted as evidence that parents and students do not influence one another. Direct linear associations between one member's broad values and the other member's simultaneous self-reported clarity or strain are only one possible form of influence. Family effects may operate through financial control, communication, conflict, reassurance, information provision, or changes over time. Recent research shows that parental preferences can alter educational intentions [6], while family support may be both enabling and stressful [8]. The present study therefore narrows the claim to the measured pathway: partner value scores did not add substantial cross-sectional explanatory power once each respondent's own values were included.

Congruence Adds Little Across Multiple Analytic Approaches

The absence of a general congruence effect was consistent across two analytic approaches. None of the twelve polynomial models showed a significant improvement when the quadratic and cross-product terms were added to the linear component scores. Eleven of twelve discrepancy coefficients were non-significant; the remaining coefficient was small, counter to a simple congruence-benefit expectation, and did not survive correction. This contrasts with studies finding value-congruence benefits for selected outcomes or value domains [29, 30], but it is consistent with the broader conclusion that congruence effects are conditional rather than universal [31]. Recent dyadic response-surface studies likewise show that the meaning of congruence depends on the construct, reporter, and outcome under study [37, 38]. In the present decision context, disagreement in broad values was not itself a reliable marker of lower clarity or higher strain.

Common Method Variance and the Item-Overlap Check

Common method variance remains the principal alternative explanation for the actor-dominant pattern. Actor predictors and outcomes share a respondent and occasion, whereas partner predictors do not. The lack of overlapping item wording between Freedom and Decision Clarity reduces the risk of a literal item-content tautology but cannot remove shared response style, mood, or implicit theory. The results therefore support an association among concurrently self-reported constructs, not a causal conclusion that partner values have no influence. Longitudinal cross-lagged measurement, behavioural observation of parent–student discussions, or multi-informant assessment of the same outcomes would provide a stronger test.

Psychological and applied implications

Psychologically, the findings suggest that a family's participation in a shared decision should not be treated as evidence of a shared internal state. Screening only for "family agreement" may miss the distinct sources of clarity and strain carried by each participant. In applied settings, separate assessment of parent and student concerns may therefore be more informative than assuming that disagreement is the principal problem. This is a hypothesis-generating implication rather than evidence for a counselling intervention: the study did not compare individualised and consensus-building approaches, and it cannot establish that efforts to improve communication or agreement are ineffective.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The study was cross-sectional, so temporal ordering and causal influence cannot be established. Same-respondent measurement may inflate actor associations relative to partner associations. The SSF-OS and outcomes showed similar reliability across roles, but full configural, metric, and scalar invariance was not tested; parent–student mean comparisons should therefore be interpreted cautiously. Participants came from one national context and were recruited through counselling-adjacent education networks rather than probability sampling. The survey did not record whether the parent respondent was a mother, father, or other guardian, and it did not collect household income or parental education, preventing subgroup and socioeconomic analyses. The outcomes were brief domain-specific measures rather than clinical indicators, and the study did not measure communication quality, financial control, conflict, or relationship closeness. Finally, the analyses were not preregistered; the convergence of methods improves confidence but does not convert the findings into confirmatory evidence.

Future Research

Future research should first use repeated measurements across key decision stages to test whether partner effects emerge when families receive offers, confront costs, or make final commitments. Second, multi-group confirmatory factor analysis should establish whether the SSF-OS and outcome measures function equivalently across parent and student roles. Third, future dyadic studies should measure plausible interpersonal mechanisms—communication, autonomy support, conflict, financial influence, and perceived pressure—rather than treating value scores as the only pathway of family interdependence. Cross-cultural replication would show whether the weak correspondence and actor-dominant pattern generalise beyond Indian families considering international study.

Conclusion

Among 801 parent–student dyads making international higher-education decisions, parent and student values corresponded only weakly, each person's own values were consistently associated with their own Decision Clarity and Decision Strain, and partner values showed no reliable direct associations. Value congruence added negligible explanatory power across response-surface and discrepancy-controlled

analyses. These findings do not diminish the importance of families in educational choice. They show instead that a jointly made decision need not produce shared decision psychology, and that broad value disagreement alone should not be assumed to explain family strain.

Abbreviations

APIM
actor–partner interdependence model
CI
confidence interval
HC3
heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimator
RQ
research question
RSA
response surface analysis
SSF-OS
Security–Status–Freedom Orientation Scale
VIF
variance inflation factor.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was approved by the Zigma Six Ethics Board, Mumbai, India (registered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Human Research Protections: IRB registration number IRB00015192; Federalwide Assurance FWA00036459), under study approval number SS/2026/001-17, granted prior to data collection. Electronically recorded informed consent was obtained from all adult participants. Participants younger than 18 years provided assent, and parental or guardian consent was obtained.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. The manuscript reports only aggregate, anonymous data and contains no identifiable individual information.

Availability of data and materials

The de-identified dataset and analysis code supporting the findings are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to ethical and privacy safeguards.

Competing interests

The author is the founder and director of an international education counselling practice through whose associated networks participants were recruited. Participants were not paying clients of the practice at the time of data collection, and participation or non-participation had no bearing on any service. The author declares no other competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

Karan Gupta (Karan Gupta Consulting, Mumbai, India) is the sole author of this manuscript. Karan Gupta conceived the study, designed the survey instrument, collected and analysed the data, interpreted the findings, prepared all tables, and wrote and revised the manuscript. Karan Gupta read and approved the final manuscript.

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Related analyses

The dataset has been used in two related manuscripts: one addressing development and validation of the SSF-OS and another examining organisational-design implications for advisory services. The present article reports distinct dyadic actor–partner and response-surface analyses; no results tables are duplicated. The related manuscripts should be disclosed to the editor and supplied on request.

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