

The Association Between Family Dinners, Feelings of Closeness with Parents, and Subsequently, Adolescent Happiness



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Introduction

- Sitting down for dinner with family members has been proved to be a successful method for carving out time for parent-child communication (Fulkerson 2013)
- Parent-child relationships are crucial to adolescent development (Shao, Kang 2022) and improve adolescent mental health and overall happiness (Meier 2014)
- Regardless of the significance of the association between family dinners and closeness with parents, their relationship is arbitrary without a “so what”: in this case, I added the variable of how happy the participants feel
- Perhaps family dinners are required in certain households, or participants feel close to their parents but that closeness has little influence on their daily lives. By adding happiness, we can see if family dinners and closeness with parent closeness are associated with adolescent happiness

Methods

Sample

- 20,000 adolescents who were in grades 7-12 during the 1994-95 school year
- Participants were drawn from the first wave of the The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)

Measures

- Frequency of family dinners was assessed on a scale of 0-7 for how many nights a week respondents had dinner with a family member and coded into more than half (7-4) and less than half (0-3)
- Closeness with mother and father were measured on a scale from 1-5, 1 being “not at all” and 5 being “very much”. These responses were coded into “close” and “not close” (1-3 and 4-5, respectively)
- Happiness was measured on a scale of 0-3 (never happy to happy most/all of the time) and coded into “happy” and “unhappy” (0-1, 2-3, respectively)

Research Questions

- Is there a relationship between the frequency of having family dinners (or having family dinners in the first place) and adolescents’ feelings of closeness to their parents?
- Does the association between family dinners and closeness to parents influence adolescent happiness?

Results

Univariate

- Family Dinners:
 - 67.3% of participants have family dinner more than three times a week while 11% have zero family dinners a week
- Parents:
 - 67% of participants feel close to their fathers and 84% feel close to their mothers
- Happiness:
 - 21.6% of the participants said they either rarely feel happy or never feel happy while 78.4% of participants feel happy most of the time

Bivariate

- Logistic regression analysis showed that those who have higher numbers of family dinners per week feel significantly closer to their parents than those who have few to no family dinners per week, $p < 0.0001$.
- As the number of family dinners per week increase, the percentage of participants who feel close to both parents increase, while the percentage of participants who feel close to neither parent decreases

Multivariate

- Multiple regression analysis shows that the association between levels of closeness with Mom and happiness are significant, $p < 0.0001$
- Multiple regression analysis shows that the association between levels of closeness with Dad and happiness are significant, $p < 0.0001$
- Those who feel high levels of closeness with mother and high levels of closeness with father have the highest levels of happiness (Figure 2)
- Those who feel low levels of closeness with mother and low levels of closeness with father feel the lowest levels of happiness (Figure 2)

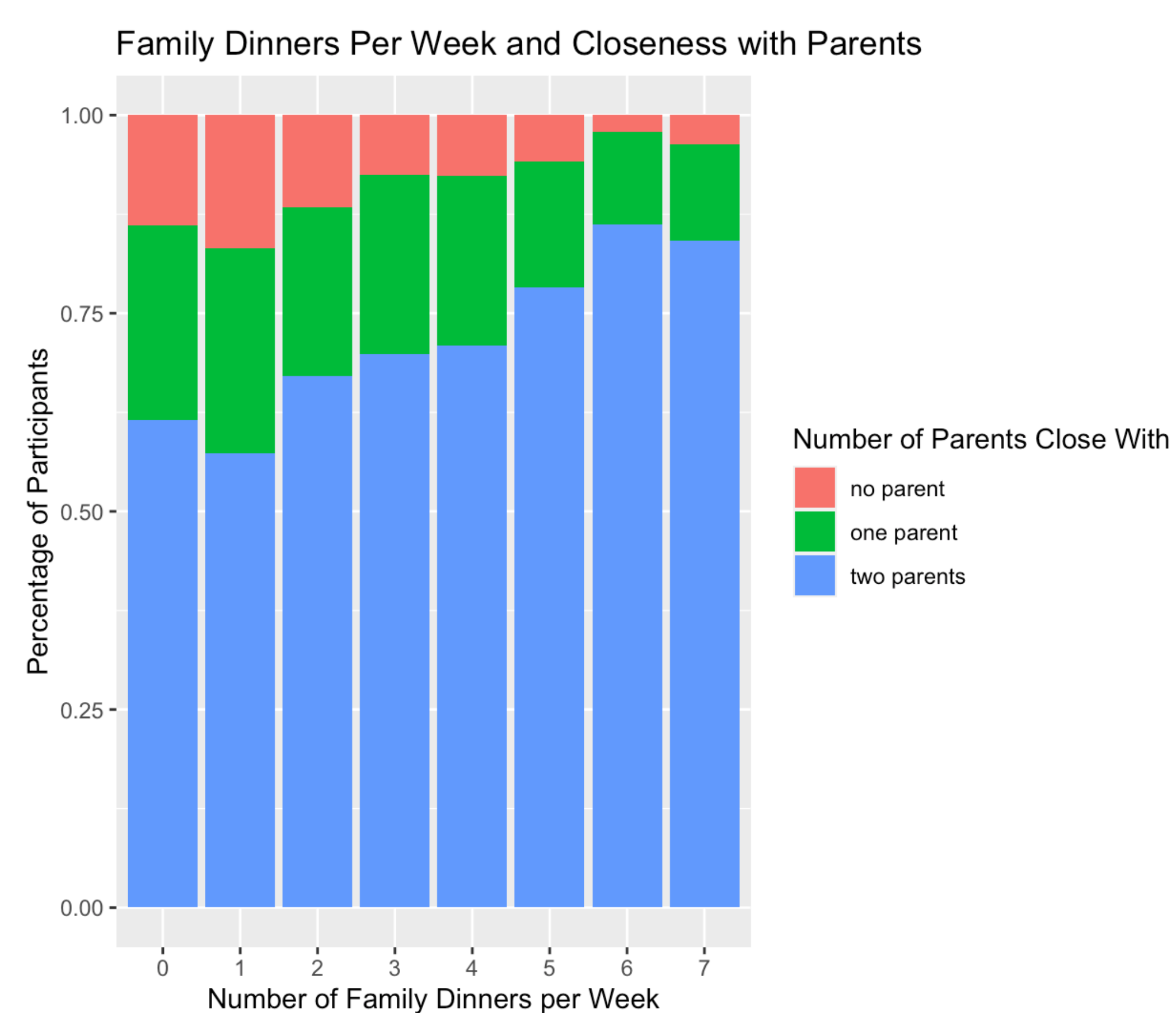


Figure 1. Number of family dinners per week and percentage of participants that feel close to no parents, one parent, and both parents

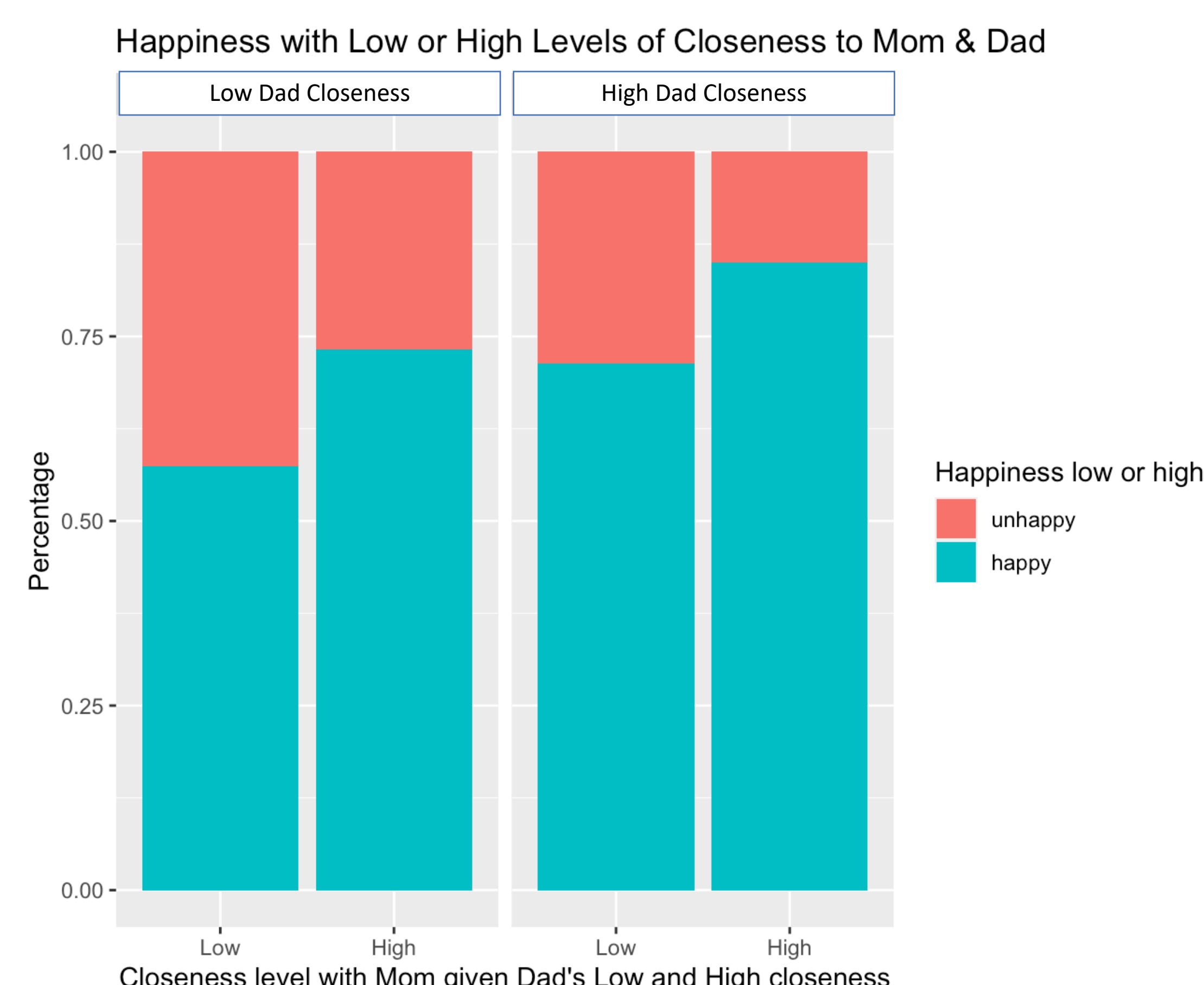


Figure 2: Closeness with Dad (Low: first two bars on left, high: second two bars), Closeness with Mom (on the x-axis) and percentage of participants in each of those intersections that feel happy and unhappy

Multivariate Cont.

- Individuals who sit down for family dinners more than half of the nights per week feel closer to both their mothers and their father than those who do not (Figure 1)

Discussion

- The data prove that there is a significant association between the frequency of family dinners, how close one feels to each and both of their parents and, in turn, how happy they feel
- The implications of these findings is that family dinners can be an important time for parents and children to connect and that this communication time is associated with a child’s feelings of closeness with their parents
- Also, parents who wish to improve their relationships with their children may look to family dinners as a method of doing so
- Finally, this research implies that establishing a good relationship with one’s children is a good approach to ensuring higher levels of happiness
- This research only focuses on how one’s relationship with their parents is associated with their happiness. Further research may determine other factors that play a role in an adolescent’s happiness levels, such as relationships to friends or exercise habits.

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