

## **PERCEIVED INTER-PARENTAL CONFLICT AND ANGER EXPRESSION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Madhurima Giridharan\*, Dr. T. Lavanya\*\*

\*PhD Scholar, Department of Psychology, University of Madras, Chepauk, Chennai-600005.

\*\*Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Madras, Chepauk, Chennai-600005.

### **ABSTRACT**

Conflicts are a part of any family but when children see their parents fighting, there is a high chance that it can lead to negative attitudes, faulty communication, feeling of insecurity and as a result of which anger outbursts may develop. The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between perceived inter-parental conflict and anger expression among college students. The participants of the study were students from arts and science colleges in Chennai. Five hundred students (N=500, Male=250 and Female=250) have participated in the study. Ex Post Facto research design and convenience sampling technique was used for data collection. The Child's Perception of inter-parental conflict scale by Fincham & Grych, (1992), young adults version was validated by Bickham & Fiese, (1997) and Anger Expression scale by Spielberger, (1986) has been used to collect data. Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Independent "t" test were computed as part of statistical analysis. The results show that there is a significant relationship between perceived inter-parental conflict and anger expression among college students. There were also significant differences in gender on perceived inter-parental conflict and on anger expression. Implications of the study are discussed and suggestions for further study are recommended.

**Keywords:** Perceived Inter-Parental Conflict, Anger Expression, College Students.

India has the second largest world population. But when it comes to the number of young people (10 – 24 years) it tops the charts with a humongous 356 million which is the largest in the world. A survey done by the All India Survey of Higher Education (2014-2015) has reported that there are about 33.3 million individuals who have enrolled for higher education of which 17.9 million (54%) are boys and 15.4 million (46%) are girls. The students who are enrolled in college belong to the age group of 18 to 23 years. Further 80% of this population are enrolled in an undergraduate programme. On the whole there are 89, 764, 132 people in the age group of 20-24

years. There are 757 universities, 38, 056 colleges, 11, 922 standalone institutions in India. These statistics indicate the wealth of young force that needs to be guided and groomed.

College students are at the cusp of the adulthood and fall in the age group called as young adulthood. Adulthood is characterised by establishing an independent identity, getting married or finding a life partner, raising children, building and maintaining careers and accepting the disability or the death of one's parents (Sadock & Sadock, 2015). Adulthood can be split into three major phases. They include young or early adulthood (20 – 40 years), middle adulthood (40 – 65 years) and late adulthood (65 years and above) (Sadock & Sadock, 2015).

Two prominent theorists who have delineated the essentials of this age are Erickson (1978) and Levinson (1978). Erickson (1978) has said that individuals in this age should successfully resolve the crisis of intimacy vs. isolation to develop the virtue of love. When they are unsuccessful in resolving this crisis it makes them alienated, disconnected and alone. Levinson (1978) has described adulthood as a period of stability and stress, signified by transitions that occur at specific chronological times during the life course. He has categorised the adulthood into 8 stages ranging from 17 to 40 years. The first stage ranges from 17 to 22 years, is termed as early adult transitions. This is characterised by factors such as leaving adolescence and making preliminary choices for adult life (Berk, 2001; Ashford & LeCroy, 2009). Further the ages from 23 to 40 has been termed as the novice phase. Further, Levinson has formulated the concept called as life structure which is the outcome of specific decisions and choices made along the life course in areas of relationship, occupation and child bearing. He says that during this novice phase, there is development of a person's personality and they begin to differentiate (emotionally, geographically and financially) from their families of origin. He further notes that the life structure keeps changing with time and life course. There are many factors that affect young adults. These include socio economic status, parental expectations, availability and interactions with adult role models, neighbourhood conditions, community and peer pressures. Successful adaptation to young adulthood would include completing education, obtaining suitable work, entering into a stable and satisfying relationship. On the other hand when there is failure to adapt to young adulthood it might lead to poor health, delinquency, dropping out of college, unemployment and teen pregnancy (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003). These all make it essential that the young adults are given the resources to build a healthy life for successful progression into adult life. To enhance the focus on the college going population and taking into consideration the various changes globalisation has brought about, Arnett (2000) has proposed the concept of emerging adulthood. He has defined it as the period from the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18 – 25". Arnett has given five characteristics that represent this age. It is an age of possibilities, a self-focused age, age of identity exploration, age of instability, age of feeling in-between.

### **Inter-parental Conflict:**

Inter-parental conflict is a term used to refer to the exposure of children to quarrels between their parents, ranging along a wide continuum from everyday disagreement to physical violence. McClosky, Figuero & Koss (1995) have defined inter-parental conflict as daily stressors occurring between parents ranging from minor disagreement and arguments to severe arguments and physical violence. According to Buehler, Krishnakumar, Antory, Tittsworth and Stone (1994) inter-parental conflict is a disparity between parents about various life issues. Interparental conflict is a multidimensional construct characterised by frequency, mode of expression, duration, intensity, and degree of resolution (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

The several dimension of inter-parental conflict include (Smith, 1999):

**Exposure:** Children might overhear or observe overt inter-parental conflict which has negative impact on the child's behaviour.

**Frequency:** When there is recurrent quarrel between parents, the children are exposed to frequent inter-parental conflict. Studies have found that children exhibit higher symptoms and behaviour problems when their parents fight frequently (Grych & Fincham, 1992).

**Intensity:** When the inter-parental conflicts are overtly hostile or physically aggressive, children are negatively affected. In a research done by Cummings and Davies (1994) children were made to watch videos involving physical and verbal aggression between adults. It was found that more distress was reported in the cases of physical aggression than verbal aggression. Further, children who had a history of being exposed to physical aggression at their homes were more distressed.

**Resolution:** Children esteem their parents and hold them as role models when they view them resolving the conflicts that arise. Research has shown that children can infer when conflicts have been resolved or not and are distressed with unresolved conflicts.

**Content:** Adjustment problems in children form the basis for inter-parental conflicts that concern the child.

**Child attributions:** The beliefs children hold regarding inter-parental conflict have an impact on their distress levels. For example, self-blame and perceived control over their parents marital problems may lead them to feel more distressed.

**Child involvement:** When children believe they are responsible for initiating or stopping the inter-parental conflicts, they are more likely to be involved in the quarrels. This may make them a part of the quarrels or abuse could be directed at them or become triangulated within the conflicts.

Research has shown that gender differences exist in the way boys and girls respond to parental conflict at home. The nurturing of boys and girls is different right from birth. For example, the toys, they are given to play with tends to develop nurturing and communication skills for girls whereas competitiveness and independence in boys (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2010). Research has shown the response to high conflict at home differs among boys and girl. Stereotypically boys are expected show less emotions, hence, they lack the skills to self-soothe and also they spend most of their time with their peers leaving them unequipped to deal with emotion laden situations constructively. Hence, they exhibit more externalising behaviours (Cummings et al., 1985). On the other hand, girls experience increase in anxiety and distress as they tend to exhibit internalising symptoms.

### **Anger-Expression:**

Spielberger (1999) defined anger as an emotional state that can range in intensity from mild irritation to extreme rage. It is natural and an automatic response to pain . Anger is a response felt intensely when individuals feel rejected, threatened or experience loss. As anger accompanies pain and is never seen as a single emotion it is also called as second-hand emotion (Mills, 2005). Hence anger provides a temporary relief from their pain. When a person is angry he sees the world in a negative, cynical fashion, or with aggression. This has come to be known as the triad of anger – anger, hostility and aggression. The ABC structure of trait anger sees it as inclusive of angry affect, behavioural aggression and cynical cognition. Anger by itself has functional and adaptive value. It is the frequency, intensity, duration and mode of expression that constitutes the high levels of anger (Forbes et al., 2004).

Spielberger (1988) has conceptualised the different forms of anger. They are

Anger In: “tendency to experience but suppress the anger, typically in negative aggressive ways”.

Anger Out: It is defined as the tendency to overtly express anger, typically in negative aggressive ways.

Anger control: It is the tendency to be patient and calm and modulate emotional and behavioural expression of anger.

Anger expression: It is the general index of anger expression based on the responses to anger-in, anger out and anger control items. It is calculated by incorporating responses to anger in, anger out and anger control.

### **Aim of the study**

The present study is designed to examine the relationship between perceived inter-parental conflict and anger expression among college students.

### **Objectives**

To find the relationship between Perceived Inter- Parental Conflict and Anger Expression among college students.

To find the gender differences on Perceived Inter-Parental Conflict and Anger Expression.

### **Hypotheses**

There would be a significant relationship between Perceived Inter-Parental Conflict and Anger Expression.

Perceived Inter-Parental Conflict would significantly differ across gender among college students.

Anger-Expression would significantly differ across gender among college students.

### **METHOD**

#### ***Participants***

The sample consisted of college students from various arts and science colleges in Chennai city. Five hundred college students (N=500) of which 250 were males and 250 were females have participated in the study whose age ranged between 19 to 22 years. Questionnaires were adopted as the method of data collection. Convenience sampling technique was adopted. Ex Post Facto research design was adopted for the present study.

#### ***Instruments***

- (i) The Children's perception of inter-parental conflict scale was developed by Grych, Seid & Fincham in the year 1992. It has 47 items. This scale uses a three point rating system from 0 (*false*) to 2 (*true*), which required the participants to rate the statements based upon the degree to which the participant believed them to be true. Twelve items from this scale are reversed scored. The scale measures perceived interparental conflict on three factors. They are conflict properties, threat and self-blame. This scale, which was originally designed for use with school-aged children (aged 9-12), was found to be both reliable and valid for use with young adults by

Bickham and Fiese (1997). Internal consistency and test-retest method was used to establish reliability. Test-retest was done and a gap of 2 weeks was given. The coefficient of correlation was found to have an acceptable level of stability (Conflict properties = 0.70; Threat = 0.68; Self-Blame = 0.76). The internal consistency for all the three factors were analysed and were found to be high. The coefficient alpha was found to be more than 0.80 (Grych, J. H., Seid, M., & Fincham, F. D., 1992) The validity was established by comparing scores on the scale with already standardised tests such as Parent-rated measures of marital conflict by Porter & O'Leary (1980) and Conflict Tactics Scale by Straus (1979). It was found that the rating of parental conflict by children and parents using the various scales were found to be significant with  $r = 0.30$  for Parent rated measures of marital conflict and 0.39 for Conflicts Tactics Scale.

- (ii) Anger Expression scale was constructed by Spielberger, Johnson, Jacobs, Krasner, Oesterle, and Worden in the year 1986. Anger-In, Anger-Out and Anger-Control are the dimensions measured. The Anger Expression (Ax) scale comprised of 20 items and yields four different scores. The Anger Expression score, which is based on all 20 items, provides a general index of how often anger is aroused and experienced or suppressed. The three Ax subscales assess individual differences in the tendency to: (1) express anger towards other people or objects in the environment (Ax-Out), (2) experiences but hold in (suppress) angry feelings (Ax-In); (3) control the experience and expression of anger (Ax-Con). Anger- In and Anger-Out comprise 8 items each, and Anger-Control comprises 3 items. The internal consistency of 20 items anger expression (Ax/Ex) scale and the eight item Anger-In and Anger-Out subscales were evaluated by computing alpha coefficients and item remainder correlations. The item remainder correlations for the Ax/Ex scale were based on all 20 items comprising these subscales. The alpha ranged from 0.73 to 0.84 and was highest for the Ax-In subscale. Although somewhat lower, the alphas for the Ax-Out subscale were nevertheless reasonably satisfactory for a brief 8 item inventory .The scale was assessed for its construct validity by administering along with the modified form of assessing anger by Harburg and his colleagues. The anger in and anger out scores of anger questionnaire was found to correlate with those of the modified Harburg questionnaire which provided evidence for concurrent and construct validity. Further, the scores in anger in which was correlated with Beck Anxiety Scale was found to be associated with anxiety ( $r = 0.25$ ) and depression ( $r = 0.29$ ). The correlation with anger out scores resulted in low correlation ( $r = 0.04$ )

**Procedure**

The instruments were administered to 500 college students (N=500) who belonged to various arts and science colleges in Chennai City. Informed consent was obtained from the individual participants and concerned higher authorities. They were instructed to fill their demographic details and then they were given the instructions regarding how they had to fill in the questionnaires. They completed answering the statements within 30 to 35 minutes. Confidentiality of the obtained data was ensured.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Table I: shows the relationship between perceived inter-parental conflict and anger expression**

<b>VARIABLES</b>	<b>R</b>
<b>Perceived Inter-Parental Conflict</b>	<b>0.158**</b>
<b>Anger Expression</b>	

**\*\* Correlation is significant at 0.01 level**

Table I shows the correlation between perceived inter-parental conflict and anger expression. From the table it is clear that perceived inter-parental conflict and anger expression have a strong positive correlation ( $r=0.158$ ). Therefore as an individual's perception of inter-parental conflict becomes high there is a subsequent increase in their anger expression. Witnessing conflict can create an aversion for adolescents and it is often associated with increased arousal, distress and aggression as well as long term adjustment difficulties including behavioural, emotional, social and academic problems. Children who come from homes witnessing high conflict appear to be vulnerable to externalizing problems such as verbal and physical aggression, noncompliance, and delinquency, as well as internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety (Cummings and Davies 1994).

**Table II: shows gender differences on perceived inter-parental conflict among college students**

VARIABLES	GROUP	N	MEAN	SD	t VALUE
Perceived Inter-Parental Conflict	Male	250	36.0080	14.28370	8.175**
	Female	250	45.1647	10.42916	

**\*\* Significant at 0.01 level**

Table II shows the gender differences on perceived inter-parental conflict among college students. From the table it is clear that females have scored higher than males on how they perceive their parental conflict. We have seen that some adolescents are badly affected by negative family conflicts while many others survive without significant problems. It can be inferred that the way in which children understood the conflicts between their parents had different effects on their emotional and behavioral problems. Where children blamed themselves for the conflicts between their parents, they were more likely to have behavioral problems. But if their parents fighting or arguing led to a child feeling threatened, or fearful that the family would split up, the child was more likely to experience emotional problems, such as depression. Women tend to be able to recognize and process the negative emotions of others better than men do (Babchuck et al., 1985; McClure, 2000). This plays a very vital role in the Indian context as females are more in need of interpersonal connectedness and tend to adopt self-blame behaviours as a coping mechanism to deal with their parental conflict rather than assertion or violence. This finding is supported by a study done by Davies and Lindsay (2004) which showed that girls were more vulnerable to inter-parental conflict than boys which lead to more internalised symptoms in them than boys.

**Table III: shows gender differences on anger expression among college students**

VARIABLES	GROUP	N	MEAN	SD	t VALUE
Anger Expression	Male	250	46.1760	8.47634	5.240**
	Female	250	42.7280	7.51478	

**\*\* Significant at 0.01 level**

Table II shows the gender differences on anger expression among college students. It can be understood from the table that males are found to be more on their expression of anger than females. Research has shown that women feel more embarrassed about themselves after an angry episode (Deffenbacher et al.,1996), they fear being abandoned by their romantic partner (Campbell & Muncer, 1987) and the societal expectations that women need to be more calm and composed .These indicate that they might feel uncomfortable with regard to expression of anger. According to Sadeh, Javdani, Finy, and Verona (2010), females experience anger, but may express it differently than males. For example, instead of expressing anger by striking objects, adolescent females may talk to friends or peers (Fischer & Evers, 2011). Conversely, other studies purport that females express anger similarly to males, but experience difficulty recognizing and admitting the emotion due to social expectations and constraints (Karreman & Bekker, 2012). Males, on the other hand, tend to display anger more commonly and comfortably (Fischer & Evers, 2011). One of the many reasons that adolescent males may feel comfortable expressing anger is because it is socially acceptable (Burt et al., 2013).

**Limitations**

The results of the study cannot be generalized due to a small sample size. Cause and Effect was not studied. Questionnaires were the only method that was used for collecting the data. Higher order statistical procedures were not employed.

**Implications**

Based on the findings:

Awareness programmes on emotional management

Family Counselling

Anger Regulation

Forgiveness Interventions

Individual Counselling could be given to enhance overall well-being.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study on perceived inter-parental conflict and anger expression among college students was conducted on 500 college students in which 250 were male and 250 were female. The study shows that there was a significant positive correlation between perceived inter-parental conflict and anger expression. There was a significant difference in gender on perceived inter-parental conflict among college students. There was a significant difference in gender on anger expression among college students.

## **REFERENCES**

- Arnett, J. J. (2000a). *Emerging adulthood: Prospects for the 21st century*.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000b). High hopes in a grim world: Emerging adults' views of their futures and of "Generation X." *Youth & Society*, 31,267-286.
- Ashford, Jose, & LeCroy, Craig. (2009). *Human behaviour in the social environment: A multidimensional perspective*: Cengage Learning.
- Babchuk, W. A., Hames, R. B., & Thompson, R. A. (1985). Sex differences in the recognition of infant facial expressions of emotion: The primary caretaker hypothesis. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 6, 89 – 101.
- Berk, L. E. (2001). *Development through the lifespan (2nd ed.)*. Toronto: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bickham, N. L., & Fiese, B. H. (1997). Extension of the children's perceptions of interparental conflict scale for use with late adolescents. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 11(2), 246-250.
- Buehler, C., Krishnakumar, A., Anthony, C., Tittsworth, S., & Stone, G. (1994). Hostile interparental conflict and youth maladjustment. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 43(4), 409-416.
- Burt, I., Patel, S. H., Butler, S. K., & Gonzalez, T. (2013). Integrating leadership skills into anger management groups to reduce aggressive behaviors: The LIT model. *Journal of Mental*

*Health Counseling*, 35(2), 124- 141. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1346367815/fulltextPDF?accountid=8111>

Campbell, A., & Muncer, S. (1987). Models of anger and aggression in the social talk of women and men. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 17(4), 489-511.

Cummings, E.M., & Davies, P. (1994) *Children and marital conflict: The impact of family dispute and resolution*. New York: Guilford Press.

Cummings, E. M., Iannotti, R. J., & Zahn-Waxler, C. (1985). The influence of conflict between adults on the emotions and aggression of young children. *Developmental Psychology*, 21(3), 495-507. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.21.3.495

Davies, P. T., & Lindsay, L. L. (2004). Interparental Conflict and Adolescent Adjustment: Why Does Gender Moderate Early Adolescent Vulnerability? *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18(1), 160-170. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.18.1.160>

Deffenbacher, J. L., Oetting, E. R., Thwaites, G. A., Lynch, R. S., Baker, D.A., Stark, R.S., Eiswerth-Cox L.(1996) State-trait theory and the utility of the Trait Anger Scale. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*. 43:131–148. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.43.2.131.

Erikson, E. (1978). *Reflections on Dr. Borg's life cycle*. In E. Erikson (Ed.), *Adulthood* (pp. 1-31). New York: W. W. Norton.

Fischer, A. H., & Evers, C. (2011). The social costs and benefits of anger as a function of gender and relationship context. *Sex Roles*, 65, 23–34. doi:10.1007/s11199-011-9956-x

Forbes, D., Hawthorne, G., Elliott, P., McHugh, T., Biddle, D., Creamer, M., Novaco, R.W., (2004). A concise measure of anger in combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. 17(3), 249–256.

Grych, J. H., & Fincham, F. D. (1993). Children's appraisals of marital conflict: Initial investigations of the cognitive-contextual framework. *Child Development*, 64, 215-230.

Karreman, A., & Bekker, M. H. J. (2012). Feeling angry and acting angry: Different effects of autonomy-connectedness in boys and girls. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35, 407–415. doi:10.1016/Journal of adolescence.2011.07.016

Levinson, D.J. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. New York: Ballantine.

McCloskey, L.A., Figueredo, A.J., & Koss, M.P. (1995). The effects of systemic family violence on children's mental health. *Child Development*, 66, 1239-1261

- McClure, E. B. (2000). A meta-analytic review of sex differences in facial expression processing and their development in infants, children, and adolescents. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(3), 424-453.
- Mills, H. (2005). Health cost of anger. Retrieved from [http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view\\_doc.php?type=doc&id=5809&cn=116](http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=5809&cn=116)
- Mortimer, J. T., & Shanahan, M. J. (Eds.). (2003). *Handbook on the life course*. New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Papalia D. E., Wendkos-Olds S. & Duskin-Feldman, R., *Human Development*, (2010, 11<sup>th</sup>ed.), Bucharest: Editura Trei
- Porter, B., & O'Leary, K.D. (1980). Marital discord and childhood behaviour problems. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 8, 287-295.
- Sadock, B. J., Sadock, V. A., & Ruiz, P. (2015). *Kaplan & Sadock's synopsis of psychiatry: Behavioral sciences/clinical psychiatry* (Eleventh edition.). Philadelphia: Wolters Kluwer.
- Smith, E. R. (1999). *Affective and cognitive implications of group membership becoming part of the self: New models of prejudice and of the self- concept*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Spielberger, C. D. (1999). *Manual for the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory-2*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Spielberger, C. D. , Johnson, E. H., Jacobs, G. A., Krasner, S. E., Oesterle, S. E., and Worden, T. J. (1986). The Anger EXpression (AX) Scale. Unpublished manuscript, University of South Florida, Center for Research in Community Psychology, Tampa
- Spielberger, C. D. (1988). *Manual for the State-Trait Anger Expression Scale (STAX)*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.
- Straus, M. A. (1979). Measuring intra family conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics Scales. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41, 75-88.
- Verona, E., Sadeh, N., & Javdani, S.,(2010). *The influences of gender and culture on child and adolescent psychopathy*. In R. Salekin, & D. Lynam (Eds.), *Handbook of child and adolescent psychopathy* . New York: Guilford Press

**Acknowledgement:** The researcher wishes to thank Prof. T. Lavanya, Supervisor, Department of Psychology, University of Madras for being a pillar of support in the completion of the present research work.