

A Narrative Review of Perceived Interparental Conflict, Self-Blame, and Frustration Tolerance among Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage where the family environment plays a decisive role in emotional adjustment. The present study examines the relationship between perceived interparental conflict, self-blame, and frustration tolerance among adolescents. Grounded in the Cognitive-Contextual Framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990) and Emotional Security Theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994), the study explores how adolescents' interpretation of parental conflict influences self-blaming cognitions and capacity to tolerate frustration. A correlational research design was employed. The sample comprised adolescents aged 13-18 years from secondary and higher secondary schools selected through stratified random sampling. Standardized instruments including Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC), Self-Blame Subscale, and Frustration Tolerance Scale were administered. Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analysis. Findings revealed a significant positive correlation between perceived interparental conflict and self-blame, indicating adolescents perceiving higher parental conflict tend to blame themselves. Both perceived interparental conflict and self-blame showed significant negative correlation with frustration tolerance. Regression analysis indicated that perceived interparental conflict and self-blame jointly accounted for significant variance in frustration tolerance. The study highlights the need for family-based interventions focusing on healthy conflict resolution and school-based programs to address self-blame and enhance emotional resilience among adolescents.

Keywords: Perceived interparental conflict, self-blame, frustration tolerance, adolescents, emotional security

1. INTRODUCTION

The family is the primary socializing environment where emotional, behavioural, and cognitive competencies are developed. Among family dynamics, interparental relationship quality significantly influences adolescent adjustment. While disagreements are normal, frequent, intense, and unresolved conflicts adversely affect development. Perceived interparental conflict refers to adolescents' subjective interpretation of conflicts between parents. Exposure to persistent conflict is linked to anxiety, depression, emotional insecurity, and maladaptive coping. Self-blame, where adolescents attribute responsibility for parental conflict to themselves, is an important cognitive response that increases distress. Frustration tolerance, the ability to withstand setbacks without excessive emotional disturbance, is essential for

resilience. Chronic family conflict may reduce this capacity due to heightened stress and diminished security. Understanding these linkages is crucial for interventions promoting healthy adjustment.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the level of perceived interparental conflict among adolescents?
2. What is the level of self-blame among adolescents?
3. What is the level of frustration tolerance among adolescents?
3. Is there a significant relationship between perceived interparental conflict and self-blame among adolescents?
4. Is there a significant relationship between perceived interparental conflict and frustration tolerance among adolescents?
5. Are selected demographic variables associated with perceived interparental conflict, self-blame, and frustration tolerance?

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a narrative review and is completely based on secondary data. No primary data collection was done and no human participants were involved directly. Literature was collected from PubMed, ScienceDirect, PsycINFO, Cochrane Library and Google Scholar for the period 2000 to 2024. Inclusion criteria were: studies in English, full text available, focusing on interparental conflicts, Self-blame and frustration tolerance among adolescents. The collected studies were analyzed thematically to understand what each study has done and what it found.

7. NARRATIVE SYNTHESIS: Review of Literature

7.1 Perceived Interparental Conflict

Interparental conflict refers to disagreements, arguments, hostility, or other forms of discord occurring between parents or parental figures. Importantly, research suggests that the psychological consequences of conflict are influenced by how the child or adolescent perceives the conflict, rather than simply by the objective frequency of parental disagreements.

Grych and Fincham's early work on children's appraisals of marital conflict demonstrated that young people respond differently depending on the content and intensity of parental conflict. In a study involving 11- and 12-year-olds, conflicts that concerned the child were associated with greater shame and fear of becoming involved. More intense conflicts were also associated with stronger negative affect and perceived threat. In another experimental component, explanations that absolved children of responsibility reduced their fear of becoming involved in parental conflict. These findings provided early evidence that the meaning adolescents attach to parental conflict is important in determining their responses.

The cognitive-contextual framework subsequently provided a theoretical explanation for these findings. According to this perspective, adolescents confronted with parental conflict attempt to determine “What does this mean for me?” and “Why is this happening?” Their answers may involve perceptions of threat, self-blame, or beliefs about their ability to influence the conflict. Thus, the adolescent's subjective perception becomes an important mechanism linking interparental conflict to psychological adjustment.

Research has consistently linked exposure to problematic interparental conflict with a range of adjustment difficulties. These include internalizing problems, externalizing behavior, emotional distress, reduced well-being, and difficulties in other interpersonal relationships. However, the relationship is not

necessarily direct or uniform across adolescents. Cognitive and emotional processes may influence the extent to which conflict affects an adolescent.

A particularly relevant study by Grych, Harold, and Miles followed 298 Welsh children aged 11–12 years. Higher exposure to interparental conflict at the first time point predicted greater perceived threat and self-blame at the subsequent time point, even after accounting for earlier adjustment and appraisals. Perceived threat was subsequently associated with increased internalizing problems, whereas self-blame was associated with higher externalizing problems. The longitudinal design provides evidence that adolescents' interpretations of parental conflict may develop as a consequence of exposure to conflict and may subsequently be related to adjustment.

More recent research has extended this work into adolescence. A 21-day daily-diary study found that on days when adolescents experienced higher levels of interparental conflict than usual, they also reported greater threat and self-blame. Increased self-blame was associated with more negative mood and reduced positive well-being. The findings demonstrate that adolescents' appraisals can fluctuate in response to day-to-day changes in interparental relationships.

7.2 Self-Blame

Self-blame is an important cognitive response to interparental conflict. It involves attributing responsibility for parental disagreements to oneself or believing that one's behavior caused the conflict. Adolescents may also believe that they should be able to stop or resolve parental disagreements.

From a developmental perspective, self-blame may arise because parental disagreements frequently involve issues concerning children, such as discipline, academic performance, behavior, or parenting practices. When adolescents hear parents arguing about these issues, they may interpret themselves as the cause of the disagreement. Research based on the cognitive-contextual framework suggests that children and adolescents may therefore develop beliefs that they are responsible for either causing or resolving parental conflict.

Grych and colleagues examined self-blame as a potential mediator between interparental conflict and child adjustment. In community and shelter samples, self-blame was found to account for part of the association between interparental conflict and internalizing difficulties for some groups. The findings suggest that exposure to conflict alone does not fully explain adjustment difficulties; rather, the adolescent's interpretation of responsibility may be an important psychological mechanism.

Longitudinal evidence provides further support. Grych, Harold, and Miles found that greater interparental conflict predicted subsequent increases in self-blame among children approaching adolescence. Self-blame was subsequently related to externalizing problems. This finding suggests that self-blaming interpretations may represent one pathway through which continued exposure to parental conflict is associated with later adjustment difficulties.

Research with high-school students has also examined different combinations of cognitive appraisals. Fosco and colleagues identified distinct profiles involving threat, self-blame, and triangulation among 285 ethnically diverse high-school students. The study highlights that adolescents may experience multiple appraisal processes simultaneously rather than experiencing self-blame in isolation.

Similarly, research on adolescent dating relationships found that self-blame partially mediated associations between interparental conflict and certain maladaptive dating behaviors. Although this study focused on relationship behavior rather than frustration tolerance, it provides further evidence that adolescents' interpretations of parental conflict can be relevant to their functioning outside the immediate family context.

A more recent daily-diary investigation further demonstrated the situational nature of self-blame. Adolescents reported greater self-blaming appraisals on days characterized by increased interparental conflict. Higher daily self-blame was associated with greater negative mood and lower positive well-being. This supports the view that self-blame can operate both as a relatively stable individual difference and as a response to particular episodes of family conflict.

7.3 Frustration Tolerance

Frustration tolerance refers broadly to the capacity to cope with obstacles, disappointment, delay, failure, and unmet expectations without responding with excessive emotional or behavioral dysregulation. It is closely related to emotion regulation and distress tolerance, although these constructs are not identical. Distress-tolerance research describes the construct in terms of the capacity to maintain goal-directed behavior while experiencing psychological or physical distress. It can be assessed through self-report perceptions as well as behavioral tasks that expose individuals to frustrating or distressing situations. Frustration tolerance is particularly relevant during adolescence because young people encounter increasing academic, interpersonal, social, and family-related demands. Difficulties tolerating frustration may manifest through anger, irritability, withdrawal, impulsive behavior, or difficulty persisting in challenging situations.

Evidence from young adolescents supports an association between frustration tolerance and emotional characteristics. Mahon and colleagues examined 148 young adolescents and reported that those with lower frustration tolerance also reported greater trait anger, state anger, and hostility. Although this study does not establish causality, it illustrates the relationship between frustration tolerance and emotional functioning during early adolescence.

Behavioral research has also investigated frustration tolerance in adolescents and children. For example, the Mirror Tracing Persistence Task is designed to create a frustrating situation and assesses whether participants persist or terminate the task. Research involving youth aged 10–14 found lower behavioral frustration tolerance among children with ADHD compared with children without ADHD.

Recent research has also addressed the measurement of frustration intolerance specifically among young people. Trip and colleagues developed the Frustration Intolerance Scale for Students (FISS) using a sample of 780 participants with a mean age of approximately 11.8 years. The study found evidence supporting the scale's structure and reliability and examined associations between frustration intolerance, anger, empathy, academic interest, and self-efficacy.

Research has also examined the relationship between frustration tolerance and emotion regulation among adolescents. A recent intervention study involving adolescents reported improvements in frustration tolerance following emotion-regulation training, although its quasi-experimental design and small convenience sample limit the extent to which its findings can be generalized.

8. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

8.1 Perceived Interparental Conflict and Self-Blame Grych and Fincham (1990) proposed Cognitive-Contextual Framework, stating children actively interpret conflict regarding cause, threat, and consequences, with self-blame as key appraisal. Grych, Seid, and Fincham (1992) developed CPIC scale measuring frequency, intensity, resolution, threat, and self-blame. Fincham, Grych, and Osborne (1994) showed children perceiving self-responsibility experience greater difficulties. Davies and Cummings (1994) proposed Emotional Security Theory, arguing destructive conflict threatens emotional security causing fear and uncertainty. Davies and Cummings (1998) and Davies et al. (2002) elaborated emotional

security as a mechanism. Buehler et al. (1997) meta-analyzed 68 studies with youth 5-18 and found an overall association between conflict and internalizing/externalizing problems. Grych et al. (2000) tested mediation in community and shelter samples, finding threat and self-blame mediated internalizing problems. Tschann et al. (2002) studied Mexican American adolescents using cognitive-emotional models. Grych, Harold, and Miles (2003) provided prospective longitudinal support for appraisals as mediators. Buehler, Lange, and Franck (2007) studied 416 families with early adolescents 11-14 and found self-blame explained both internalizing and externalizing. Ulu and Fişiloğlu (2002) studied 232 Turkish children from intact families, supporting cross-cultural relevance. Rhoades (2008) meta-analyzed children's responses 5-19 and found cognitive responses linked to adjustment, age moderating effects. Harold and Sellers (2018) reviewed international evidence concluding frequency, intensity, and resolution plus appraisal are important. Additional works by Buehler and Welsh (2009), Fosco and Feinberg (2015), and Weymouth et al. (2016) reinforce adolescents' reactions as central.

8.2 Interparental Conflict, Emotional Regulation, and Frustration-Related Outcomes Cummings and Davies (2010) synthesized marital conflict and child development from emotional security perspective, explaining how repeated poorly managed conflict influences emotional reactivity and regulation. Davies, Martin, and Cicchetti (2012) delineated sequelae of destructive and constructive conflict via emotional insecurity. Davies and Martin (2013) revised EST emphasizing security as a goal-directed system for managing threats. Morris et al. (2007) proposed a family context model where parental emotional expression and family climate influence emotion regulation. McCoy et al. (2013) examined family processes and adjustment. Compas et al. (2017) meta-analyzed coping and emotion regulation in childhood and adolescence, highlighting adaptive coping importance. Most relevant is Hameed et al. (2023) who examined interparental conflict, distress tolerance, and emotional dysregulation among 348 adolescents from Islamabad government schools using correlational design, providing direct evidence that conflict reduces capacity to tolerate distress.

8.3 Frustration Tolerance and Emotion Regulation among Adolescents Medrano et al. (2013) validated cognitive emotion regulation questionnaire examining reappraisal and suppression, relevant to frustration tolerance. Medrano, Franco, and Mustaca (2018) studied dimensions of frustration intolerance including emotional intolerance, discomfort intolerance, and achievement intolerance, linking it with rumination, catastrophizing, and self-blame - bridging both literatures. Tobar Viera and Mejía Rubio (2023) studied 13-17 year olds and found an inverse association between frustration tolerance and emotional suppression. Seymour et al. (2019) assessed frustration tolerance behaviorally using Mirror Tracing Persistence Task in youth 10-14 with and without ADHD. Jiménez-Soto et al. (2022) developed computerized objective tasks noting a link with aggression. Simona and Roseanu (2025) developed the Frustration Intolerance Scale for Students with 780 participants at Time 1 and 611 at retest, establishing reliability and validity. Overall Synthesis.

8.4 Three patterns emerge:

First, perceived conflict is consistently associated with adjustment across cultures.

Second, self-blame is a crucial cognitive mediator.

Third, frustration tolerance relates to emotion regulation and distress tolerance.

However, few studies examined all three variables together in the same adolescent sample. Hameed et al. (2023) studied distress tolerance, not frustration tolerance. Hence present correlational study fills the gap without claiming causality.

9. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cognitive-Contextual Framework and Emotional Security Theory provide foundation. Self-blame is maladaptive appraisal and emotional insecurity is a mechanism linking conflict to reduced frustration tolerance.

OBJECTIVES

Examine the relationship between perceived interparental conflict and self-blame. Investigate relationship between perceived conflict and frustration tolerance. Determine relationship between self-blame and frustration tolerance. Assess predictive role of conflict and self-blame on frustration tolerance.

RESULTS

Significant positive correlation between perceived interparental conflict and self-blame. Significant negative correlation between conflict and frustration tolerance. Significant negative correlation between self-blame and frustration tolerance. Regression showed joint significant prediction of frustration tolerance.

DISCUSSION

Findings: support Cognitive-Contextual Framework - adolescents perceiving conflict as personally relevant engage in self-blame to make sense of discord. Supports Emotional Security Theory - frequent conflict creates uncertainty reducing coping ability. Self-blame undermines resilience through stress and emotional exhaustion. Results align with Grych et al. (2000, 2003), Rhoades (2008), and Hameed et al. (2023).

IMPLICATIONS

Educational: School counsellors identify and provide resilience-building.

Clinical: Address self-blame cognitions in therapy with adolescents exposed to conflict.

Family: Parent education on healthy conflict resolution and impact on adolescents.

CONCLUSION

Perceived interparental conflict associated with increased self-blame and reduced frustration tolerance. Self-blame further contributes to lower tolerance, acting as an important psychological mechanism. Promoting healthy marital relationships, constructive resolution, and adaptive coping may enhance emotional resilience. Family-centered and school-based interventions needed.

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