

DOI: 10.53555/ks.v12i4.3139

Family conflict and children: a sociological analysis of the effects of family conflict upon children among the Pakhtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

Family conflict has enormous unwanted consequences for the entire family, most specifically for the children. As the children depend on their adult elders to carry on the tasks of future building in a conducive environment at home, However, a conflicting family environment works against the cause and spoils the positive energies of the children. The current research study emphasizes examining the behavioral, academic, and occupation-related negative consequences that a child bears as a result of family conflict. The study is conducted in the Swat district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. A total of 42 participants (six from each administrative unit of Swat) are enrolled in the study and selected through stratified random sampling techniques. Data are collected in face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. After careful translation and transcription of the primary information, the data are thematically analyzed and descriptively presented. The study demonstrates that family conflict produces and reproduces negative effects for the children, predominantly on their psychological and emotional wellbeing, attitude, moral standards, social functioning, and responses in different social situations. In addition, due to an inappropriate household environment, they exhibit weak academic and skill-related performance and therefore have very few chances of getting quality jobs and the ability to flourish in sound personal businesses. The researcher feels a dire need to investigate the reasons why the system of education in Pakistani society is unable to induce patriotic sense in the citizens who, instead of their personal interests, work for the cause of the state.

Key words: Family conflict, child's problematic behavior, academic and occupational interventions, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Introduction

The family stands tallest among other social institutions mainly because of its pivotal role in the personal and social development of its members. The family provides its members with a conducive environment for the internalization of cultural and social norms, character formation, and mental health development and well-being. However, family conflict decreases the level of conformity in the family and results in disturbing its structure as well as functions (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Conflict in the family might cause distortions in family intimacy and disturb the nature of mutual obligations among the family members (Eisenberg, 1992). Although all members of the conflicting family get the unpleasant consequences, those with relatively dependent family status get more devastating impacts than others (Coleman & Deutsch, 2000). More precisely, children bear the extreme hardships of family conflicts (Lewis, 2007).

Conflict in a family may arise between two parents, between parents and their children, or among siblings (Lewis, 2007). Whereas, the manifestation of family conflict ranges from fights, quarrels, and spouse battering to child abuse and child molestation (Gottman & Katz, 1989). It not only disrupts the harmony of the family but many times ends with long-term drastic effects on the lives of the family members (Gottman & Katz, 1989; Kiernan & Mensah, 2009). A research study demonstrates that family conflict leads to frustration, aggressiveness, gender-based violence, and other violent propensities in family members even outside their homes (Walker, 1999).

Family conflict can arise from anything, including unequal income generation and expenditure, opposing views (Grych & Fincham, 1990), different household chores and unequal distribution of resources (Eisenberg, 1992),

misunderstanding among family members, and lack of consensus upon a single household decision (Coleman & Deutsch, 2000). Indeed, these conditions are further aggravated by a lack of trust and dialogue (Grych & Fincham, 1990), a lack of respect for one another, varied attitudes and tendencies, and/or idleness (Eisenberg, 1992). In addition, continued inconvenience and decreasing tendencies toward forbearance increase disharmony and result in confrontations among family members (Cummings & Davies, 2002).

Family conflict, if repeated, might increase the likelihood of the children and cause other problems like inappropriate attachment styles and inharmonious familial and social relationships, which might produce negative impacts even on their academic progress at school or college (Borst, 2015). It is also observed that children experiencing frequent conflict at home remain at high risk of psychological and social distortion, increased anger and inability to manage anger, violent behavior, delinquency, and gang involvement (Bachman, 2008). Meanwhile, they also experience sleep disturbances and are likely to have lower performance at school (Reynolds & Houlston, 2014).

Children need love and at least some moderate parental control for their mental, personal, and social wellbeing and to fulfill the tasks of family and supporting individuation (Steinberg, 2000). However, conflict atmosphere in the home is highly related to offspring's personal and mental malnutrition, aggressiveness, and violent crimes (Kiernan & Mensah, 2009), adjustment problems (Demmers, 2016), tendencies of anger, hatred, physical fights, high tempers, and risky behaviors (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012). In addition, failure to resolve family conflict may lead to adolescents having residual and persistent envy, alienation, revenge, plotting, grudges, sabotage, or even vendettas (Parrott, 2004). Likewise, these children experience mental problems like depression, withdrawal, negativity, poor social competence, and conduct-related difficulties (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Purpose of the study

Family conflict is pervasive throughout the world and is a normal social process. Though all members of the family are affected by it, but children are more vulnerable because they depend on their parents and other elders in the family to meet their psychological, physical, and social needs, including their socialization and personality development. The effects of family conflict on children's conditions have been widely researched since the 1980s (Cummings & Davies, 2002). However, there is very limited relevant research work in the Pakhtun society. The current study therefore focuses on examining the problem in the Pakhtun social setup of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and intends to answer two basic questions, i.e., (1) to analyze the aspects of a child's personality that get the maximum devastating effects of family conflict and (2) to pinpoint the obstacles that family conflict create in their academic and occupational career. The current study would contribute to the store of knowledge about a specific Pakhtun family problem on the one hand and will prevent the occurrence of family conflict by educating the readers about its consequences for their children.

Theoretical perspective on family conflicts and children's behavior

The cognitive-contextual framework of Grych and Fincham (1990) aims to explain the relationship between family conflicts and children's problematic behaviors. According to the authors, the child perceives family conflict as a stressor that has enormous negative impacts on the child's development. Moreover, intensity, content, duration, and resolution are among the most important characteristics of family conflict, and their effects are cumulative. Intense, prolonged, unsolved conflicts and those affecting the children, the family, or the marriage are very stressful for children. The effects of family conflict on the child's condition include the child's maladjustment, which in turn results in negative effects on their social, cognitive, educational, and psycho-biological functions (Cummings & Davies, 2002).

Literature review

However, an unfavorable attitude is among the leading factors arising from conflict within a family (Ahmad & Khan, 2021). But children in such families develop even further problems, mainly because of their upbringing, experiences, observations, and learning in the family (Cummings & Cummings, 1988; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004). Children show oddness in their behaviors, mostly because of the problem in their attitude. Their behavior is less likely to be predictable due to their abnormal responses in different social situations. Uncertainty and negativity in responses to things, people, issues, and events are the manifestations of such attitudinal problems (Nomura, Wickramaratne, Warner, Mufson, & Weissman, 2002). Literature suggests that children who observe frequent family conflict have a greater range of negative energies and lesser potential to manage their anger (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004).

Family conflict produces negative consequences for the overall personality of a child in the family, predominantly in terms of their moral character (Goodman & Scott, 1999). Such children, because of their social withdrawal,

engage in anti-social activities like drug addiction, gambling, relationships with multiple sex partners, and other risky behaviors, thereby adhering less to the standard behavior of society (Ahmad & Khan, 2021). Most of the street criminals in third-world countries are comprised of such children and pose a perennial threat to the interests of society (Wallace, Roberson, & Globokar, 2019).

Children bear psychological pressure in families that experience frequent conflict and eventually make them weak in discharging their social obligations. Furthermore, the cultural stigma associated with frequent family conflict causes reluctance in them to participate in different social groups, hence making them fainéant and reckless (Ahmad & Khan, 2021). Besides, due to their family culture, they are unwelcome in many social groups, which weakens their social relations with other people around them. In response, they prefer isolation that ultimately ends in alienation (David, Steele, Forehand, & Armistead, 1996).

Family conflicts instill in children rudeness and other behavioral problems like telling lies, swearing, and deception, mainly because of their exposure to harshness in the family (Wallace, Roberson, & Globokar, 2019). In addition, they care less about the standard operating procedures in their personal, familial, and social lives and respond to social realities in ways other than what is socially acceptable (Cummings & Cummings, 1988). Likewise, they behave intolerantly in different social and public affairs, leading to confrontations and conflict (Grant, Compas, Stuhlmacher, Thurm, McMahon, & Halpert, 2003). Pathetically, because of their established mindset, they get very few opportunities to improve their mental abilities and remain mentally weak (Cummings & Cummings, 1988).

Family conflicts, among others, create negative effects on the academic performance of children (Musick & Bumpass, 1998). Children from such families remain absent from school and participate less in academic processes than other children. In addition, such children develop problems with understanding and bring very few innovative ideas and potentials with them (Klein, 2005). Research indicates that such children disturb class harmony predominantly through bullying and wrangling with other children. The same study concludes that after poverty, family conflict stands as the highest indicator that leads to the dropout of children from primary school (Ahmad, 2015).

Children need a conducive environment to improve their positive energies and skills (Bandura, 1977). However, family conflicts and the resultant processes degrade the abilities and potentials of children (Goodman & Scott, 1999). In addition, such children lag behind in the process of competition for opportunities and resources due to their weak academic records. Literature suggests that their emotional insecurity and inappropriate mode of behavior also make their position weak in the realm of personal business (Grant, Compas, Stuhlmacher, Thurm, McMahon, & Halpert, 2003). Eventually, such children have lower levels of occupational attainment and higher poverty rates, which further have negative effects on their lives and relationships.

Methods and procedures

The current study is conducted in the district of Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Swat has a total area of 5337 km², which is divided into seven tehsils (administrative units) with a total population of 2.31 million (Ahmad & Khan, 2021). The study is carried out through a qualitative research design. The data were collected from 42 respondents (six from each administrative unit) through a semi-structured interview guide during face-to-face interviews. Regarding interviews, Holstein & Gubrium (2003) indicate that interviews are a way to gather factual data on the social world by asking people to discuss details about their lives. Moreover, stratified random sampling techniques are adopted to reach the most precise first-hand information. For this reason, respondents of different demographic features, like educated and uneducated residents of rural, urban, and hilly areas, joint, extended, and nuclear household structures, government servants, private employees, business owners, laborers, etc., are included in the study. The information collected is carefully transcribed, thematically analyzed, and descriptively presented.

Findings and discussion

Family conflict produces effects of the kind upon the family members, predominantly the children (DeKlyen & Greenberg, 2008). The study is guided by two main questions: 1) to analyze the aspects of a child's personality that get the most devastating effects of family conflict, and 2) to pinpoint the obstacles that family conflict creates in their academic and occupational career. In this segment, the primary information of the respondents is analyzed, discussed, and linked with the relevant literature. Moreover, frequent or alike views are presented from both educated and uneducated respondents. It is worth mentioning here that no serious differences are noted between the views of educated and uneducated respondents, and that the uneducated one's emphasized even more on the significance of education in their views, and they believed that education is not only a process for obtaining knowledge and preparing for occupational roles, but rather it has potential effects on the mental, physical, and social development of an individual. However, they demonstrated discontent regarding the institutional failure in Pakistani society and attributed it mainly to the flaws in the system of education, as almost all institutions in the society are run by educated people. The primary data in the current study demonstrates that family conflict causes a gradual regress in the following dimensions of a child's personality:

Attitude

“Recurrent family conflict negatively develop a negative attitude pattern, and they eventually bear its consequences till death.”

“They develop aberrant personality traits with which they interact with others. Their personality construct further propagates negative energies that lack inclination toward the standard operating procedures.”

Recurrent family conflict produces negative effects on the psycho-biosocial individuation of the children. Their observations and experiences at home deteriorate their normal mode of perception, and they experience a major setback in their positive attitude formation and utilization. It is also believed that an aberrant attitude present a blurred image of the social reality and consequently the others feel less comfortable with such a person. In this regard, researches indicate that children learn and imitate their significant others the way they exactly are, and children in a conflicting family develop compatible personality traits (Bandura, 1977; DeKlyen & Greenberg, 2008).

The moral standards

“Children in such families are fearless and violent mainly because they pay least attention to the moral standard of the society.”

“Lack of care, time, and affection that elder family members give to their children arises in them anti-social and immoral propensities. In addition, due to the tense environment at home, they adopt such immoral things for pleasure.”

Frequent family conflict disrupts the normal socialization process of a child and replaces their natural social capabilities with aberrant practices and deviant moral standards, including drug addiction, gambling, unapproved sexual indulgence, and crimes. It is also observed that great many deal of street criminals in the Pakhtun society are those who left their houses because of either poverty, enmities, or protracted family conflict. The current study bears a significant resemblance to the literature that shows that most of the street criminals in third-world countries are comprised of children who observe frequent family conflict at home and lack proper attention from their parents (Wallace, Roberson, & Globokar, 2019; Ahmad & Khan, 2021).

Comply with social responsibilities

“They care less about their surroundings, public property, or their environment, and feel less bound to others around them. They are in the front when any violent protest takes place.”

“Their indulgence in crimes and other anti-social practices witness their lack of comply with social obligations.”

Children experience stress and psychological pressure due to frequent family conflict. In response, they adopt behavior and practices that the other way minimizes their stress and feel them mental and physical freedom. Likewise, due to their elevated frustration and lack of trust in relationships, they violently harm public properties or their surroundings which manifests their reluctance to discharge social obligations. More precisely, they engage in criminal pursuits predominantly due to their impudence for social obligations. It is also believed that they cannot maintain normal social relations with others, eventually falling into isolation and withdrawal (David, Steele, Forehand, & Armistead, 1996).

Behavior

“Children from broken or conflicting families unpredictably respond in different social situations.”

“Their actions and reactions often cause conflict for their elders, which sometimes ends in drastic enmities.”

Children develop problematic patterns of behavior due to repeated exposure to conflict at home. Lack of proper parental care and attention due to repeated conflict suppress their natural positive propensities and create in them intolerance and aggression. Meanwhile, due to their behavioral problems and unpredictable actions and reactions, the other people around them rarely welcome them in their social groups. However, their interaction with the kind of behavior often bears abnormal consequences. Research reveals that they develop behavior of this kind mainly because of their exposure to the environment in their families and other in-groups (Grant, Compas, Stuhlmacher, Thurm, McMahon, & Halpert, 2003).

Academic performance

“Recurrent family conflict spoils the academic and other creative potentials of the children.” “Children observing recurrent family conflict demonstrate feeble interest in school and obtain weak grades.” Children need proper care, affection, and sufficient time from their parents to develop their strengths. Whereas, the unhealthy household environment instead spoils their energies, mainly because of their less supportive family relations. In the presence of family conflict, a child lacks mental and, in some instances, physical suitability for learning in school, which

abates their zeal for studies. Secondary information ratifies the fact, and it is believed that family conflict develops understanding problems in children and that they lack innovative ideas in their academic careers (Klein, 2005).

Occupational attainments

“Family conflict makes the children less suitable for getting economic opportunities.”“They lack the knowledge and skills that give them occupational equality with other children.” Children in families that observe frequent conflict do not get appropriate care from their parents on the one hand, and the tense environment within the family makes them less suitable for thriving in their knowledge and skills. In the same way, the psychological, mental, physical, and social insecurities in their minds further hinder their potential to successfully invest. In addition, their weak interaction skills further create problems for them in the domain of their personal businesses. Literature suggests that their emotional insecurity and inappropriate mode of behavior also make their position weak in the realm of personal business (Grant, Compas, Stuhlmacher, Thurm, McMahon, & Halpert, 2003).

Conclusion

The study is intended to answer two main questions. i.e., (1) to analyze the aspects of a child’s personality that get the most devastating effects of family conflict, and (2) to pinpoint the obstacles that family conflict creates in their academic and occupational career. The current study indicates that family conflict has enormous unwanted effects on the personality of a child, ranging from mental disturbance to psychological, emotional, and physical insecurity. Eventually, these feelings of insecurity propel their negative energies and cause aberrant personality traits in them, leading to anti-social behavior.

The first question of the study aims to discover the aspects of a child’s personality that get the maximum negative effects from family conflicts. The present study indicates that the behavioral aspect of a child’s personality has the most devastating effects, which create problems during interaction with others. The behavioral problems are further analyzed into attitudinal problems, lack of moral standards, inability to comply with social responsibilities, and problems related to responses in different social situations. The primary data establishes that attitude is the main driving force that directs and redirects one’s behavior. In this connection, an abnormal attitude results in an abnormal behavior that might end in inconvenience to others. It is also believed that with an abnormal attitude, the process of accommodation is difficult. It is noteworthy here that family conflict causes a higher level of stress and frustration in the family, due to which the children develop negative energies and are least likely to follow the moral code of conduct. In addition, they are reluctant to comply with social responsibilities, predominantly because of a lack of trust in social relations. Eventually, they respond to everything, person, and situation in a negative and disturbing way. It is also asserted that because of their psychological and emotional instability, they negligibly feel a need to address their behavioral problems.

The second question focuses on the ways family conflict intervenes in the academic and occupational careers of the children. The current study indicates that due to frequent family conflict, the parents cannot afford their children sufficient time and care because the children often remain absent from school. It is also perceived that they have less participation in the academic process than other children, mainly because of their weak understanding and lack of interest in the process. Consequently, they have very limited chances of any reputable employment opportunity. Likewise, the attitudinal and behavioral problems of these children disable them from refining their mental abilities and communication skills, which further weaken their positions in private jobs or personal businesses. Due to this fact, they cannot maintain a quality life and tend to pursue criminal pursuits.

The current study finds that family conflict produces aberrant personality traits in the children, which they manifest in their behavior toward the outside world. They sense, feel, perceive, and act differently because of the stress that they experience in the family and in their relationships therein. In line with the cognitive-contextual framework of Grych and Fincham (1990), the current study demonstrates that frequent family conflict acts as a factory that produces and reproduces enormous problems in the personalities of the children in the family, ranging from mental inconsistency to behavioral and adjustment-related problems. Their personal, familial, and social functioning is not as normal and effective as that of other children.

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