



## INFLUENCE OF FAMILY TYPE AND GENDER ON CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT

### Psychology

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### ABSTRACT

There is considerable heterogeneity in child outcomes with respect to the effect of interparental conflict which has led to the consideration of a multivariate model that could explain the conditions that moderate the effect of interparental conflict. In line with this, the present study aims to explore gender and family type as possible sources of variance in children's perception of interparental conflict. An Ex-post facto research design was adopted and a sample of 300 children between 12 and 15 years of age were purposively selected to take part in the study. The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) (Grych & Fincham, 1992) was used. Independent sample t tests were used to examine gender and family type differences in CPIC scores. The results revealed significant gender difference in perception of self blame ( $t(298) = 4.62, p < .01$ ) and threat to self ( $t(298) = -2.61, p < .05$ ); with girls perceiving greater threat and boys more likely to direct blame towards self. Family type differences were observed only in the perception of self-blame ( $t(298) = 1.84, p < .01$ ) with higher scores observed among children in nuclear families. Also, a two-way Analysis of variance revealed significant interaction effect between gender and family type on CPIC ( $F(1, 296) = 3.56, p < .05$ ).

### KEYWORDS

Gender, Family type, Children's perception of interparental conflict

Rapid acculturation has brought about significant alterations in the Indian family unit. Virtual communication channels, increased employment of women, industrialisation and diversification of gainful economic activities has led to a drastic shift in parenting and quality of marital relationships. An eminent area of change has been the nature of interparental conflict and its impact on children, especially with the soaring divorce rates in India [1]. Interparental conflict (IPC), also referred to as marital conflict, consists of disagreements, arguments and disputes between parents. Significant research has been conducted in understanding the implications of IPC in adolescent adjustment. It has been found that children exposed to a heavy dosage of IPC are likely to show more internalising and externalising problems [2]. However, a deeper look into the more proximal factors is necessary to understand the real relationship between IPC and psychological functioning of adolescents.

Two models have been proposed to explain the moderating effects of gender on perception of interparental conflict and the resulting outcomes. The Male vulnerability model posits that boys are more susceptible to the damaging effects of IPC; that is a stronger relationship between adjustment and CPIC exists among boys and girls. The Differential reactivity model emphasises that both the genders experience similar levels of distress but their behavioural and emotional manifestations may be different due to differences in socialisation [3]. However, it is important to understand that gender operates in different ways across different levels of children's functioning. Urbanisation has brought about a significant decline in the rich Indian tradition of supportive and cohesive family networks. Joint families which promote collectivism has been a major source for promoting psychological wellbeing among children across many centuries [1]. In the context of interparental conflict, a joint family set up has a major role to play in the way children perceive the conflict.

Despite theoretical underpinnings for gender and family type as potential sources of variability in child outcomes, there is scarcity of Indian studies that look at the interaction of these variables with respect to children's perception of interparental conflict. Thus the present study aims to close this gap in literature by engaging in a creative confluence of theory and methods to conceptualise gender and family type as marker variables for understanding the multivariate constellation of mechanisms that influence children's perception of

interparental conflict.

#### Method of Investigation

##### Research design

An Ex post facto research design was used as the study aimed to describe the state of affairs as it exists with no manipulation or control of variables.

##### Sample

Purposive sampling was used to collect data from 300 children from three different schools in Chennai city. The mean age of the sample was found to be 13.6 years and the sample comprised of 150 boys and 150 girls out of which 40% of girls and 58% of boys came from nuclear families. Inclusion criteria for the sample was (i) Students between 12 to 15 years of age (ii) Attending regular English medium schools.

##### Tool used

#### Children's perception of inter parental conflict Scale (CPIC) (Grych & Fincham, 1992)

The scale assesses the child's primary and secondary appraisals of specific aspects of parental conflict. It has 49 items organised into 9 conceptually designed sub-scales, with reports of 4-factor higher order structure: Conflict properties (frequency, intensity and resolution); Threat to self (threat and coping efficacy) and Self blame (content and self -blame) and Triangulation/Stability [4]. The items are rated on a three point likert scale: True (2), Sort of true (1) and False (0) with higher scores indicating greater intensity and more negative perception of interparental conflict.

##### Psychometric properties

The scale has well established internal consistency as measured by coefficient alpha (.98, .83, .91 and .68) [4]. It also has moderately highly test-retest reliability (.70, .68, .76 and .55) over a two week period [4]. Both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis reveal a stable four factor structure [5].

##### Statistical tests

- (i) Independent sample t test was used to examine gender and family type differences in children's perception of interparental conflict.
- (ii) Two-way Analysis of variance was used to investigate the interaction effects of gender and family type on children's perception of interparental conflict.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1: Independent sample t test comparing scores on Conflict properties, Threat to self, Self blame and Triangulation between boys and girls.**

	Group						95% CI for Mean Difference	t	df
	Boys			Girls					
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n			
Conflict properties	19.66	11.04	150	19.42	11.31	150	-1.76, 2.21	.18	298

Threat to self	12.39	7.32	150	14.51	7.24	150	-.43, 2.36	-2.61**	298
Self blame	6.41	4.46	150	4.47	2.54	150	1.54, 2.11	4.62**	298
Triangulation/Stability	9.98	5.11	150	9.47	5.57	150	-.82, 2.63	.82	298

\*p<.05, two-tailed

\*\*p<.01, two-tailed

An Independent samples t-test showed a statistically significant difference in perception of 'threat to self' between boys and girls ( $t(298) = -2.61, p < .05$ , two-tailed). Table 1 indicates a higher score on this factor among girls ( $M = 14.51, SD = 7.24$ ), insinuating that they are more likely to feel overwhelmed and out of control when exposed to interparental conflict. These findings can be explained from multiple perspectives. According to gender schema theory boys and girls are differentially reinforced for different social behaviours [6]. While boys are encouraged to be autonomous, self-directed, self-protected and assertive, only an acquiescent behaviour is reinforced in girls [2]. Girls are socially predisposed to maintain stronger ties with family, be more involved in the household and act as pacifiers. This may lead to greater internalising problems in girls such as a sense of alienation, depression, anxiety and poor self esteem in response to an unstable family environment. In boys however, the need for agency may open up channels for physical aggression, delinquency and conduct issues. Also, in the face of interparental conflict, girls are more likely to catastrophize the outcome, imagining the worst case scenarios such as an argument leading to a divorce or physical injury of one or both

parents [7].

Table 1 also reveals a statistically significant difference in perception of 'self-blame' between boys and girls ( $t(298) = 4.62, p < .01$ , two-tailed). This indicates that boys are more likely than girls to direct blame towards self in the face of interparental conflict. One line of explanation points to the developmental differences in cognitive and emotional maturation of the sexes [8]. It has been found that starting from an early age, girls are better at recognising subtle facial effects, processing emotional expressions and in being sensitive to social cues. Also, being more efficient in deciphering social communication and in understanding the dynamic operation of a marital union makes girls less likely to engage in concrete judgements and irrational attributions. While boys, with their rudimentary social understanding of cause and effect are more likely to direct blame towards the self when the reasons for marital conflict are ambiguous [9]. Also, it is more likely for the themes of marital conflict to revolve around misbehaviour of young boys than girls, which adds to their predisposition to direct blame inward [4, 10]. These findings are consistent with previous research [2].

**Table 2: Independent sample t test comparing scores on Conflict properties, Threat to self, Self blame and Triangulation between children belonging to nuclear and joint family.**

	Group						95% CI for Mean Difference	t	df
	Nuclear			Joint					
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n			
Conflict properties	18.23	11.01	147	21.83	11.29	153	-2.29, 2.75	.54	298
Threat to self	14.51	5.61	147	16.75	9.65	153	-1.79, 1.54	-1.35	298
Self blame	8.85	3.40	147	5.21	3.11	153	1.11, 2.76	3.46**	298
Triangulation/Stability	9.16	4.11	147	9.47	5.47	153	-.71, 1.72	.62	298

\*\*p<.01

Table 2 reveals a statistically significant difference in perception of 'self-blame' between children belonging to nuclear and joint family ( $t(298) = 3.46, p < .01$ , two-tailed). This indicates that children from nuclear families are more likely to direct blame towards self ( $M = 8.85, SD = 3.40$ ) than children from joint families ( $M = 5.21, SD = 3.11$ ). Literature reports substantiates these findings [11].

combine in dynamic ways to impact this construct. The results show that girls in nuclear families have scored the highest on overall CPIC scores ( $M = 73.05, SD = 2.23$ ) and girls in joint families have scored the least ( $M = 58.72, SD = 2.81$ ) which insinuates that social support plays a greater role in how females perceive parental conflict than males. Once again differences in gender role expectations clearly substantiates these findings. The family system is more central to the girls wellbeing and hence a nuclear family set up combined with intense interparental conflict maybe more distressing for the socially oriented female sex. Among boys, joint family system appears to reduce negative perception of interparental conflict ( $M = 62.61, SD = 3.38$ ) once again pointing to the benefaction of joint families in the psychological wellbeing of children [12].

Self blame is considered to be a maladaptive emotion focused coping strategy that can be countered by the presence of social support [12]. The joint family system offers a network of kinship to fallback on during times of stress and helps satisfy multiple needs of children. For instance, offering the child with adequate information helps them arrive at more rational conclusions about the causes of interparental conflict; offering encouragement and appreciation satisfies the child's esteem needs and an extended family system may mediate between the child and parent during times of stress thereby helping them deal with such situations more effectively [1].

**CONCLUSION**

The results of the above study reveal that girls are more likely to perceive greater threat in the face of interparental conflict while boys are prone to engage in self blame. Also, a nuclear family set up increases the likelihood of children scapegoating themselves for parental conflict. These two demographic variables interact in significant ways with girls in nuclear families more vulnerable to perceive interparental conflict in highly negative ways. The main limitation of the study was that the sample was restricted to children between 12 to 15 years of age from English medium urban schools. Hence the results are restrictive in their generalisability. One of the main implications of the study is that cataloging the moderating effects of gender and family type with respect to CPIC will help child psychologist and school counsellors analyse the precise conditions and processes by which interparental conflict influences developmental trajectories. This insight will aid in the development of niche specific intervention modules such as focusing on self-blaming tendencies among boys in nuclear families while teaching coping strategies for girls in similar set ups.

**Table 3: Two way ANOVA (2 x 2 factorial design) for evaluating interaction effect of gender and family type on Children's overall perception of interparental conflict**

Sources of variance	Type III Sum of squares	df	MS	F	$\eta^2$
Corrected Model	544.33	3	181.37	1.8	.34
Intercept	7937358.34	1	7937358.34	36768.86	.46
Gender	22.24	1	22.24	2.26*	.40
Family type	122.40	1	122.40	1.31*	.52
Gender * Family type	445.13	1	445.13	3.56*	.50
Error	72748.77	296	215.87		

\*p<.05

Table 3 reveals significant main effects for gender ( $F(1, 298) = 2.26, p < .05, \eta^2 = .40$ ) and family type ( $F(1, 298) = 1.31, p < .05, \eta^2 = .52$ ) on children's overall perception of interparental conflict. More importantly, it indicates a significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 298) = 3.56, p < .05, \eta^2 = .50$ ) between gender and family type which implies that not only do they influence CPIC independently but they may

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