



How Exposure to Perceived Parental Conflict in Childhood Affects Romantic Relationship Satisfaction in Adulthood

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Abstract: This study examines the association between childhood exposure to perceived parental conflict and adult romantic relationship satisfaction among young adults (aged 20–35). Grounded in Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), the research explores how early experiences of parental discord influence emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning in adulthood. A quantitative, non-experimental correlational design was employed with a purposive sample of 180 participants recruited via online questionnaire. The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) assessed perceived parental conflict, and the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) measured current romantic relationship satisfaction. Spearman's rho correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation ($\rho = -0.148$, $p = .048$), indicating that greater perceived parental conflict in childhood is linked to lower romantic relationship satisfaction in adulthood. Gender was not significantly associated with either variable. Findings support the intergenerational transmission of relational patterns and highlight the importance of family-level intervention, conflict resolution training, and attachment-informed therapeutic approaches.

Keywords: *Perceived Parental Conflict, Romantic Relationship Satisfaction, Attachment Theory, Social Learning Theory, Intergenerational Patterns, India*

1. Introduction

1.1 *Romantic Relationships*

Romantic relationships are central to adult psychological well-being and social development. Yet the quality of these relationships is not formed in isolation; it is deeply rooted in individuals' early developmental experiences within the family environment. Parents serve as the first models of intimacy, conflict resolution, and attachment behavior, and children who witness frequent or intense parental conflict may internalize emotional schemas that shape their own relationship functioning in adulthood.

1.2 *Perceived Parental Conflict*

It is defined as the child's subjective interpretation of disagreements, hostility, or tension between parents has been associated with a range of adverse developmental outcomes (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Research consistently demonstrates that exposure to destructive interparental conflict is linked to emotional distress, insecure attachment, and difficulties in forming satisfying adult relationships (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Despite a robust body of Western literature, limited empirical work has been conducted within the Indian socio-cultural context, where collectivist values, family interdependence, and emotional restraint may shape the expression and impact of parental conflict in distinct ways.

The present study investigates whether individuals who perceive higher levels of parental conflict during childhood report lower satisfaction in their adult romantic relationships, contributing both to theoretical understanding and to culturally situated empirical knowledge on this topic.

2. Review of Literature

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1989) proposes that children develop internal working models of relationships based on early caregiver interactions. Persistent, intense, or unresolved parental conflict can undermine secure parent-child attachment, leading to anxious or avoidant attachment styles that persist into adulthood and are associated with lower romantic relationship satisfaction. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) complements this perspective by explaining how children observe and internalize parental conflict-handling behaviors including withdrawal, escalation, and aggression as templates for their own future intimate relationships.

The Cognitive-Contextual Framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990) further emphasizes that

it is the child's appraisal of conflict particularly perceptions of threat and self-blame rather than the mere occurrence of conflict, that drives negative outcomes. Emotional Security Theory (Cummings & Davies, 1994) similarly posits that interparental conflict endangers children's felt sense of family stability, producing emotional insecurity that later manifests in adult relational difficulties. Together, these frameworks predict that higher perceived parental conflict should be associated with lower adult romantic relationship satisfaction, mediated by attachment insecurity, impaired emotion regulation, and maladaptive relational schemas.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim

This study aimed to: (1) assess levels of perceived parental conflict among young adults; (2) determine their current romantic relationship satisfaction; and (3) examine the association between these two variables.

3.2 Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant correlation between perceived parental conflict in childhood and romantic relationship satisfaction in adulthood.

H₁: Perceived parental conflict in childhood is negatively associated with romantic relationship satisfaction in adulthood.

3.3 Design

A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design was employed. Participants (N = 180) were young adults aged 20–35 years currently involved in a romantic relationship. The sample was nearly gender-balanced (M = 1.39, SD = 0.49; coded 1 = male, 2 = female), drawn from urban and semi-urban regions of India, and recruited through social media, educational institutions, and professional networks via purposive sampling.

3.4 Participants

Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 20–35, currently in a romantic relationship, and proficient in English. Individuals with severe psychiatric diagnoses, those who had lost both parents, or those currently undergoing therapy for romantic or family issues were excluded.

3.5 Measures

Perceived parental conflict was measured using the Children's Perception of Interparental

Conflict Scale (CPIC; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992), a 17-item instrument assessing conflict frequency, intensity, resolution, self-blame, and perceived threat (True / Sort of True / False response format; total score range 0–48). Higher scores reflect greater perceived parental conflict.

Romantic relationship satisfaction was assessed using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), a 7-item global measure of relational satisfaction rated on a 1–5 Likert scale (range 0–35). Higher scores indicate greater satisfaction.

3.6 Procedure and Ethics

Following institutional approval, participants completed an online questionnaire via Google Forms comprising the informed consent form, demographic questions, CPIC, and RAS (in that order). Responses were anonymous and data were stored securely. Participants were advised of their right to withdraw at any time and provided with contact details for counseling support should the questions evoke distress. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all primary variables. The mean CPIC score was 29.94 (SD = 8.53; range: 0–48), indicating moderate perceived parental conflict. The mean RAS score was 26.11 (SD = 6.55; range: 0–35), indicating moderate-to-good romantic relationship satisfaction. Shapiro Wilk tests confirmed that all variables significantly deviated from normality ($p < .001$), justifying the use of non-parametric analyses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Normality Tests for Primary Variables ($N = 180$)

Variable	M	Mdn	SD	Min	Max	Shapiro–Wilk p
CPIC Total	29.94	30.0	8.53	0	48	< .001
RAS Total	26.11	27.5	6.55	0.00	35.0	< .001
Gender	1.39	1	0.49	1	2	< .001

Note. CPIC = Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale; RAS = Relationship Assessment Scale. Gender coded 1 = male, 2 = female.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Spearman's rho correlations were computed among CPIC total score, RAS total score, and gender (Table 2). A statistically significant negative correlation was observed between CPIC and RAS scores ($\rho = -0.148$, $p = .048$, $df = 178$), indicating that higher perceived parental conflict in

childhood is associated with lower romantic relationship satisfaction in adulthood. Gender was not significantly correlated with CPIC ($\rho = 0.023$, $p = .764$) or RAS ($\rho = -0.031$, $p = .679$). On the basis of these results, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

Table 2. *Spearman's rho Correlation Matrix (N = 180)*

Variable	1. CPIC	2. RAS	3. Gender
1. CPIC	—		
2. RAS	−0.148*	—	
3. Gender	0.023	−0.031	—

Note. * $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

5. Discussion

The central finding of this study a statistically significant negative correlation between childhood perceived parental conflict and adult romantic relationship satisfaction is consistent with theoretical predictions and extends prior empirical work to an Indian young adult sample. Although the effect size is modest ($\rho = -0.148$), this is typical in research examining the long-term outcomes of developmental risk factors, where multiple variables jointly shape adult relational functioning (Cohen, 1992).

The finding aligns with Attachment Theory, children exposed to chronic, unresolved interparental conflict may develop insecure internal working models characterized by anxiety, mistrust, and avoidance patterns that can impair the emotional intimacy and communication quality central to adult relationship satisfaction (Muetzelfeld, 2019; Tolmacz et al., 2022). Consistent with Social Learning Theory, individuals who witnessed hostile or avoidant conflict behaviors between parents may replicate similar maladaptive patterns in their own romantic relationships (Cui et al., 2008).

The absence of significant gender differences suggests that the impact of perceived parental conflict on relationship satisfaction operates similarly across genders, supporting calls for gender-inclusive family intervention programs (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

The present results are broadly consistent with the wider literature. Braithwaite et al. (2016) and Sagkal and Ozdemir (2019) demonstrated that interparental conflict independently predicted lower couple satisfaction in Western and Turkish samples, respectively. A recent Pakistani study

(2023) similarly found that perceived parental conflict predicted lower marital satisfaction, underscoring cross-cultural relevance in collectivist contexts. The modest effect size observed here may partly reflect the buffering role of India's strong family support networks and collectivist norms or may indicate the contribution of unmeasured variables such as attachment style, coping strategies, and partner compatibility.

A notable counterpoint is provided by Cupatela (2019), who found no significant association in an undergraduate sample, underscoring that the relationship is probabilistic rather than deterministic. Protective factors including sibling support (Fihn et al., 2018), social networks (Quan & Zhang, 2025), and self-awareness can meaningfully attenuate the negative effects of early conflict exposure.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes empirical support for the intergenerational transmission of relational patterns in a non-Western, collectivist sample. The findings reinforce the value of integrating Attachment Theory and Social Learning Theory to understand how early family environments shape adult romantic functioning, while highlighting those early experiences—though influential—are not deterministic. The human attachment system retains plasticity in response to corrective emotional experiences, supportive relationships, and therapeutic intervention.

5.2 Practical Implications

For clinicians and counsellors, these findings underscore the value of incorporating family-of-origin assessments into relationship therapy and premarital counselling. Exploring clients' childhood perceptions of parental conflict can illuminate the roots of maladaptive relational schemas and guide attachment-informed interventions such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). At the systemic level, parenting programs that teach constructive conflict resolution and emotional attunement can help mitigate the intergenerational transmission of relational dysfunction. School-based social-emotional learning curricula that normalize and contextualize family conflict for children may similarly provide a protective buffer.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal studies are needed to map developmental pathways from childhood conflict exposure to adult relational outcomes. Second, retrospective self-report of childhood experiences

is subject to recall and social desirability biases. Third, the small-to-moderate effect size and the modest sample size limit statistical power to detect nuanced effects. Fourth, the study did not assess potential mediators such as attachment style, emotion regulation capacity, or conflict resolution skills that may explain the observed association. Future research should employ longitudinal or prospective designs, include validated measures of attachment and emotion regulation, examine gender and socioeconomic moderators, and recruit more diverse samples within and beyond India to improve generalizability and cultural specificity.

6. Conclusion

This study provides evidence that childhood exposure to perceived parental conflict is negatively associated with adult romantic relationship satisfaction among Indian young adults, supporting the intergenerational transmission of relational patterns as articulated by Attachment Theory and Social Learning Theory. While the association is modest, its significance is theoretically meaningful and practically relevant. Early family environments shape, but do not determine, adult relational outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of preventive family interventions, attachment-focused therapies, and psychoeducation that empower individuals to recognize and rewrite maladaptive relational scripts inherited from their families of origin.

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