

Influence of Interparental Conflict & Internet Dependency on Callous –Unemotional Trait in Adolescents

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Abstract

Violence orchestrated by adolescents has been on rise. It is thus imperative to understand the underlying causes of violence. Callous – unemotional trait has been considered as fundamental elements leading to violence, which could be triggered by environmental factors like interparental conflict and internet dependency. The present study aims to explore the influence of interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents. The study adopted ex post facto design and snowballing sampling technique. 300 adolescents between 18-21 years of age participated in the study. The following questionnaire - Children's perception of interparental conflict scale, Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire (PIUQ -9), and Inventory of callous – unemotional trait was used. Two-way ANOVA was obtained using SPSS 16.0. Results revealed that there is no significant interaction effect between interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents.

Keywords: *Adolescents, interparental conflict, internet dependency, callous–unemotional trait*

1. Introduction

In 2019, the Crime Records Bureau registered a total of 51.5 lakh cognizable crimes across the Indian subcontinent, including 32.2 lakh IPC crimes and 19.4 lakh SLL crimes. Despite several nationwide lockdowns, the statistics have risen. These reports may imply that the world is witnessing an increase in 'deviant people' and true evil. However, it is important to note that humanity has a dark side, and its existence should not surprise those who consider themselves to be good people (Simon, 2008)^[19].

Adolescence

Violence cannot be solely attributed to adults, rather it is highly prevalent among adolescents as well.

The term adolescence comes from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means "to grow up." According to the American Academy of Paediatrics (2015)^[1], adolescence lasts from the age of ten to the age of twenty-one. Nienstein et al. (2009) further classified adolescence into three groups: early (10-14), middle (14-16), and late adolescence (17-21).

Adolescence has been reinforced by more recent social and biological changes, such as economic restructuring and shifting parenting cultural paradigms (Goldin & Katz 2008, Settersten et al. 2005). Adolescents face new challenges, such as romantic and sexual relationships, identity exploration, and increased responsibilities (Tammilehto et al. 2021)^[21]. According to Casey et al. (2008), adolescence is associated with increased risk-taking behaviours as well as increased emotional reactivity. Puberty, with its flood of hormonal activity and rapid physiological development, crystallises the changes (Susman et al. 2003)^[20]. Behavior changes occur as a result of developmental changes, which are influenced by both external and internal factors that elicit and reinforce behaviour (Jaworska & MacQueen, 2015)^[9].

Adolescents are at high risk of dropping out of high school, drug and alcohol abuse, smoking, violence, sexual intercourse, and gang-related behaviour if they do not have adequate familial support, social relationships, and personal control (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006)^[24].

Restraint of antisocial impulses is learned from the cradle, within the family and through many social structures. However, despite the restraints, children and adolescents have also been victims of violence. Many people today believe that we need to eliminate violence in our society after witnessing the fall of young and innocent people. Consequently, it is imperative to address the core causes of violence (Dalai Lama).

Callous – Unemotional trait

Whether using teacher and parental ratings of these traits in preadolescent children (Frick et al. 2000; Kotler & McMahan, 2005)^[8,9] or self-report or clinical ratings of these traits in incarcerated adolescents, three similar dimensions often emerge when the various traits associated with violence are studied in samples of youth. These include 1) callous unemotional qualities, 2) an arrogant and dishonest interpersonal style characterised by a narcissistic perspective of oneself and cunning and manipulative behaviour, and 3) an impulsive and reckless behavioural style characterised by poorly planned behaviour and boredom (Frick & White, 2008)^[7].

The lack of empathy is frequently associated with callousness, an emotionless quality (also commonly referred as callousness). Lack of shame, lack of empathy for others, and callous use of others for one's gain are defined as callous traits (Frick & White, 2008)^[7]. Callous and unemotional (CU) traits show an emotive and interpersonal style that characterises a subpopulation of antisocial teenagers (Campagna et al. 2021). The combination of these qualities, which include a lack of guilt, emotional expression, and an inability to perceive others' feelings and needs, appears to be stable throughout childhood (Frick, Kimonis, Dandreaux, & Farrell, 2003).

Children with CU characteristics have trouble controlling their emotions, and this behaviour has been related to aspects of adult psychopathic personality ("psychopathy"; Frick et al, 2005). Children with low CU qualities exhibited emotion dysregulation, whereas children with high CU traits exhibited low fearfulness (Willoughby et al. 2011). Fearlessness and thrill-seeking behavior are linked to CU characteristics (Essau et al. 2006).

Children with CU traits, for example, have been shown to be less emotionally responsive to fearful and sad facial expressions (Blair et al., 2001; Dadds et al., 2008; Daddset al., 2006; Leist & Dadds, 2009), sad vocal inflections (Stevens et al., 2001), fearful body postures (Muoz, 2009), and pictures of people and animals in distress (Muoz, 2009). (Kimonis et al. 2006; Kimonis et al., 2008).

The presence or lack of empathy thus determines an individual's ability to sustain constructive, collaborative relationships with others (Simon, 2008) and, as a result, his or her desire to violate others' rights.

Interparental conflict

Biological predispositions triggered by family environment (Morgan, 1994), socioeconomic environment (Roderick, 1993), race and gender (Houston, 1991), locus of control (Boehm, 2000), type of family (Juinam & Chantaranamchoo, 2015)^[10], use of social network (Juinam & Chantaranamchoo, 2015)^[10], family relationship (Chummanon, 2005), and social environment can all influence violence (Veangkum, et al. 2005).

Several factors influence the family climate shared by parents and children, but perceived inter-parental conflict is the most influential (Chaudhry & Shabbir, 2018)^[3]. Adolescents' awareness and engagement in inter-parental conflict may have a positive or detrimental impact on them, depending on their attitude toward life. This may result in adolescents engaging in externalising (e.g., misbehaviour, delinquency, violence) or internalising (e.g., depression, anxiety) behaviours, as well as increased harmful behaviours and patterns (Scheier & Carver, 2001).

Olatunji and Idemudia (2021)^[17]; Buehler and Gerard (2004); and Gorman-Smith et al. (1996) revealed that when children are exposed to frequent, intense, and poorly resolved parental conflict, their developmental results are jeopardised. These consequences may result in externalising problems like as temper tantrums (Masten et al., 2005; Vahedi et al., 2019), which may subsequently develop into developmentally inappropriate aggression.

Furthermore, interparental conflict may impact adolescent misbehaviour by lowering parental knowledge. Frequent conflict can cause parents to become overwhelmed by their own difficulties, leaving them with less energy to devote to parenting tasks like caring for adolescents and gathering information from them (Pereyra & Bean, 2017).

Poor parental knowledge, on the other hand, contributes to parents becoming increasingly ineffectual in giving guidance and leadership. This circumstance can lead to teenagers having too much freedom and becoming too autonomous, which increases their chances of developing delinquent behaviours (Dishion et al., 2004; Fosco et al., 2012; Cutrn et al., 2017).

Internet dependency

Internet dependency is defined as excessive and/or improper Internet use that can result in psychological, social, academic, or professional challenges (Beard & Wolf, 2001; as cited in Laconi et al. 2018)^[2].

Overuse of the Internet has been documented and reported to cause physical, psychological, and social problems, comparable to other addictions such as compulsive gambling (King, 1996). Loneliness (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 1997), helplessness, guilt, anxiety, or sadness have all been associated to IAD in studies (Egger & Rauterberg, 1996).

Ko et al. (2009)^[11] revealed that excessive Internet use is a significant risk factor for violence. Similarly, Yen et al. (2008) discovered a strong link between aggressive behaviour and Internet addiction. Trumello et al. (2018)^[22] discovered that low perceived maternal availability, high cognitive reappraisal, and high callousness were predictors of Internet addiction, with high callousness being associated to violence and deviancy.

Development of callous – unemotional trait has been linked to both environmental and biological factors, moreover, studies have reported that environmental factors act as triggers which leads to external manifestations of the predisposed traits. Therefore, the present study aims to understand the influence of interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous-unemotional trait in adolescents.

1. Literature review

Interparental conflict and Internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait

In a community sample of adolescents, Baroncelli et al. (2020) investigated the interactive effects of callous-unemotional traits (CU traits) and internalising emotion problems on generalised problematic Internet use (GPIU). The study employed the Generalized Problematic Internet Use Scale 2, the Emotional Problems Scale, and the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits. The findings showed that CU traits were associated with GPIU in adolescents who had internalising emotion problems.

Trumello et al. (2018)^[22] investigated the relationships between parental relationship, emotion regulation, and callous-unemotional traits and Internet addiction in a community sample of adolescents aged 10 to 21 years. The study employed measures such as the Questionnaire about New Digital Technologies, the Lum Emotional Availability of Parents Questionnaire, the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, and the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits. According to the findings, Internet addiction is predicted by low perceived maternal availability, high cognitive reappraisal, and high callousness.

According to Davies and Martin (2013)^[5], dominant patterns of responding to interparental conflict are proposed to be associated with children's tendencies to gradually diminish the importance of close social relationships, laying the groundwork for the development of interpersonal callousness and hostility.

Relationship between interparental conflict and internet dependency

Dijk et al. (2021) investigated problematic internet use among divorced adolescents. The study looked at the impact of mediating factors like self-esteem and family characteristics like interparental conflict on internet addiction. According to the findings, simply observing interparental disagreement has no effect on or mediates problematic internet use.

Wang (2021)^[23] looked at the impact of interparental conflicts on middle school adolescents' online game symptomology. Interparental conflict, among other variables, was found to be significantly associated to online game symptomology in students. The findings also show that the effects of interparental conflicts on adolescent online game addiction symptomatology are mediated in part by the parent-adolescent connection as well as adolescent loneliness.

2. Methodology

Research question

The guiding research question is:

1. Is there an interaction effect between interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents?

Hypotheses

H.1 There will be no significant interaction between interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents.

1.a There will be no significant difference between adolescents with high and low interparental conflict on callous – unemotional trait.

1.b There will be no significant difference between adolescents with high and low internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait.

Research design and sampling technique

Ex post facto design and snowballing sampling technique was used to carry out the study.

Sample description

The study consisted of 300 adolescents (n= 150 males and n=150 females) which represent the total sample size. The participants were between 18 to 21 years of age.

Psychometric measures

Interparental conflict: To observe the intensity of perceived interparental conflict among the participants, Children's Perception of Interparental conflict Scale (Grych et al., 1992) was used. The questionnaire includes 51 items divided into nine subscales: Frequency, Intensity, Resolution, Threat, Coping Efficacy, Content, Self-Blame, Triangulation, and Stability.

The scale's internal consistency and test-retest reliability were verified. The CPIC alpha reliabilities varied from 0.61 to 0.83 for nine subscales, whereas the two-week test-retest correlations for the three factor analytically derived subscales were 0.70 (conflict), 0.68 (threat), and 0.76 (self – blame; Grych et al. 1992).

Scoring: The scale uses 3- point range, where 1= ‘True’, 2 = ‘Sort of True’, 3 = ‘False’. ‘False’. 12 items are reverse scored (i.e., item 1, 2, 6, 9, 14, 18, 21, 25, 29, 38, 41, and 50). The scores range from 51 to 153 with the higher scores depicting greater perception of child’s Interparental conflict.

Internet dependency: Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire (PIUQ – P, Demetrovics et al. 2011) was used to explore the intensity of internet use among participants. The questionnaire measures the associated obsessive and impulsive symptoms, as well as work/educational challenges, that are associated with excessive Internet usage. The original version had 18 components; however, the study used the shorter version, PIUQ – 9. The shortened version includes three subscales: obsession, neglect, and control problem.

The scale's internal consistency was determined to be high, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.77 to 0.91.

Scoring: The scale uses 5 – point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “always/almost always”. Scores range from 9 to 45, with higher scores indicating higher risk of problematic internet use.

Callous – Unemotional trait: Callous – unemotional trait was measured using Inventory of callous – unemotional trait (Frick, 2004). It is a 24-item questionnaire that examines callous and unemotional (CU) traits, which are a key feature of psychopathy and are also known as defective affective empathy (Jones et al, 2010). The measure is intended to detect three types of psychopathy in adolescents: callousness (CA), uncaring (UC), and unemotionality (UE) (UE).

The scale's internal consistency is found to be = 0.76, = 0.82, and = 0.78 for CA, UC, and UE, respectively, indicating strong internal consistency.

Scoring: The scale uses 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (Not at all true) to 3 (Definitely True). Higher scores indicate greater CU characteristics. There are twelve reverse scored items (items 1, 3, 5, 8, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24).

Procedure

The study used standardized scales to gather relevant data. Consent form, parental consent form, personal data sheets (for demographics) and the following questionnaires - Children’s perception of interparental conflict scale, Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire (PIUQ -9), and Inventory of callous – unemotional trait was circulated online. The questionnaires were available for a period of one month in the digital communication channel.

Data analyses

The following statistics were used to analyse the hypotheses stated for the study with the help of the software SPSS 16.0.

To understand the influence between interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents, two – way ANOVA was used.

3. Results and discussion

Table 1. Summary of ANOVA for Interparental Conflict and Internet Dependency on Callous – Unemotional Trait in Adolescents

| Source of variance | Sum squares | of df | Mean square | F |
|---|-------------|-------|-------------|--------|
| Corrected Model | 50255.45 | 269 | 186.82 | 2.45* |
| Intercept | 181925.559 | 1 | 181925.56 | 2.38** |
| Interparental Conflict | 9727.42 | 65 | 149.65 | 1.96* |
| Internet Dependency | 14958.83 | 35 | 427.39 | 5.61** |
| Interparental conflict*Internet Dependency | 16085.307 | 169 | 95.18 | 1.25 |
| Error | 2285.83 | 30 | 76.19 | |

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Two-way ANOVA was performed to find if there is an interaction between interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents. From table 1, it can be observed that there is no significant interaction effect between interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents ($F = 1.25$).

However, the analysis indicated there is a significant main effect between internet dependency and callous – unemotional trait ($F = 5.61$, $p < 0.01$) and there exists a significant main effect between interparental conflict on callous – unemotional trait ($F = 1.96$, $p < 0.05$).

Therefore, the main hypothesis

H. 1 There is no significant interaction between interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents is accepted.

However, the following sub-hypotheses,

H. 1a There is no significant difference between adolescents with high and low interparental conflict on callous – unemotional trait is rejected.

H. 1b There is no significant difference between adolescents with high and low internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait is rejected.

Discussion

Prisons are useful for punishing criminals and keeping them off the streets, but they are unlikely to discourage future crime (Nagin, 2013). To decrease and prevent violence, one must address the source of the problem. According to studies, callous - unemotional trait (Caputo et

al. 1999) is among the fundamental elements of crime. It could be triggered by environmental factors including interparental conflict (Coe et al. 2017; Trumello, et al. 2018)^[22] and internet dependency (Ko et al. 2009; Yen et al 2008)^[11].

The aim of the study, therefore, was to understand the influence of interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait on adolescents. The findings revealed that there is no significant interaction between interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents. However, it was observed that there is significant difference between adolescents with high and low interparental conflict as well as internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait. Studies by Olatunji and Idemudia (2021)^[17] revealed that when children are exposed to frequent, intense, and poorly resolved parental conflict, their developmental results are jeopardised and further when they engage in unsupervised overuse of internet, social and emotional problems emerge (Trumello, 2018)^[22]. These studies thus may support the findings which emphasise the significant main effect on callous – unemotional trait. However, the interaction effect might be affected by other contributing factors such as bullying.

4. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to understand the influence of interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents. The study revealed that there is no interaction effect between interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait in adolescents. However, there is significant difference between adolescents with high/low interparental conflict and internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait.

5. Limitations

The study included limitations such as restricted small size, lack of brief questionnaires leading to bias among participants. Moreover, the lack of qualitative analysis, limits the quality and quantity of data gathered from the participants.

6. Suggestions

Future research study could explore the role of peer pressure and bullying on callous – unemotional trait. The nature of content watched could be studied to obtain comprehensive role of internet dependency on callous – unemotional trait among adolescents.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been feasible without God's unending grace and the leadership of my supervisor, Dr. Zarina. Furthermore, I would want to thank my husband, parents, and siblings for their unwavering support in motivating me to finish the paper.

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