

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION, FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG CHILDREN

Aisha Rouf^{a*}

^aDepartment of Psychology, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Pakistan

*Correspondence to: Ms. Aisha Rouf, Department of Psychology, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Pakistan. E-mail: aisharoufbutt@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Family structure plays a significant role in children's emotional and psychological development. In recent decades, the rise in single-parent families has increased concern about the emotional well-being of children growing up in such environments. The present study aimed to examine the relationship between emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress among children from single-parent families. A sample of 140 participants was selected from educational institutions in Gujranwala, Pakistan, using a purposive sampling technique. Emotional suppression was measured using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), psychological distress was assessed through the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), and frustration tolerance was evaluated using the Low Frustration Tolerance Scale. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and independent sample t-tests were used to analyze the data. Results indicated moderate levels of emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress among participants. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between emotional suppression and frustration tolerance, as well as a significant positive relationship between frustration tolerance and psychological distress. However, emotional suppression showed a weak and non-significant association with psychological distress. Gender comparisons indicated that females reported slightly higher scores on emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress than males, though the differences were not statistically significant. The findings highlight the importance of understanding emotional regulation strategies and frustration management among children in single-parent families.

I. INTRODUCTION

Family structure plays an important role in the psychological development and emotional adjustment of children. Over the past few decades, the number of single-parent families has increased significantly across the world due to divorce, separation, death of a spouse, and other socio-economic factors (Crow & Barbar, 2000). Children raised in single-parent households often face various emotional and social challenges because they may receive limited parental attention, financial support, or emotional guidance. These circumstances may influence the child's ability to regulate emotions, cope with frustration, and maintain psychological well-being. Emotional experiences are central to human functioning and influence thoughts, behaviors, and interpersonal relationships (Beedie & Lane, 2011).

Emotional regulation strategies, particularly emotional suppression, play a crucial role in how individuals manage their feelings and respond to stressful situations. Emotional suppression refers to the conscious effort to inhibit emotional expressions or control emotional responses after they have been activated (Gross, 1998). Although it may help individuals maintain social harmony in certain situations, excessive suppression of emotions has been linked with negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and reduced psychological well-being (Solomon, 2003). Children who grow up in stressful family environments may adopt maladaptive emotional regulation strategies, which may further increase the risk of psychological distress.

Another important factor related to emotional functioning is frustration tolerance, which refers to an individual's ability to endure difficult or unpleasant situations without experiencing excessive emotional disturbance (Lawson, 1965). Low frustration tolerance can lead to irritability, aggression, and emotional instability when individuals encounter obstacles in achieving their goals (Frogatt, 1997). Previous studies have shown that difficulties in emotion regulation and low frustration tolerance are associated with increased levels of psychological distress, which is characterized by symptoms of anxiety, depression, and emotional instability (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). Therefore, understanding the relationship between emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress among single-parent children is essential for identifying psychological risk factors and developing interventions that promote emotional resilience and mental well-being.

II. METHOD

Participants

The sample of the present study consisted of 140 single-parent children selected from different educational institutions in Gujranwala, Pakistan. The participants included 70 males and 70 females, with ages ranging from 12 to 22 years. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants who were living with only one parent due to divorce, death, or separation. Participants were currently enrolled in educational institutions and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. Demographic information such as gender, age, educational level, guardian status, and family system was also collected to examine potential differences across groups.

Measures

Three standardized instruments were used to measure the study variables. Emotional suppression was assessed using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) developed by Gross and John (2003), which measures strategies individuals use to regulate emotions. Psychological distress was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) developed by Kessler et al. (2002), a widely used 10-item scale that assesses symptoms of anxiety and depression experienced during the past four weeks. Frustration tolerance was measured using the Low Frustration Tolerance Scale developed by Harrington (2005), which evaluates individuals' ability to tolerate discomfort and frustrating situations. All scales demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity in previous studies.

Procedure

Before data collection, permission was obtained from the relevant educational institutions and authors of the instruments. Participants were approached in their institutions and were informed about the purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality of responses was ensured. The questionnaires included a consent form, demographic information sheet, and the three standardized scales. Participants were instructed on how to complete the questionnaires and were allowed sufficient time to respond. After completion, the questionnaires were collected and screened for missing responses. The collected data were then entered into SPSS for statistical analysis to examine relationships among emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	α
Emotional Suppression	19.10	4.79	6-28	.78
Frustration Tolerance	184.60	33.72	98-268	.72
Psychological Distress	23.07	7.21	10-43	.80

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the main study variables. Emotional suppression showed a mean score of 19.10 (SD = 4.79), while frustration tolerance had a mean score of 184.60 (SD = 33.72). Psychological distress showed a mean score of 23.07 (SD = 7.21), indicating moderate levels of distress among participants.

Table II: Correlation among Emotional Suppression, Frustration Tolerance and Psychological Distress

Variables	1	2	3
1. Emotional Suppression	—		
2. Frustration Tolerance	.19*	—	
3. Psychological Distress	.08	.45**	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2 shows the correlation among emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress. Emotional suppression had a significant positive correlation with frustration tolerance ($r = .19, p < .05$). Frustration tolerance also showed a significant positive relationship with psychological distress ($r = .45, p < .01$).

Table III: Gender Differences in Emotional Suppression, Frustration Tolerance and Psychological Distress

Variables	Males		Females		<i>t</i> (138)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Emotional Suppression	18.70	4.60	19.50	4.90	1.23	.12	.03
Frustration Tolerance	182.10	34.20	187.00	33.10	1.22	.34	.02
Psychological Distress	22.10	7.00	24.00	7.40	.45	.67	.11

Table 3 presents gender differences in emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress. The results indicate that female participants reported slightly higher scores on emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress compared to male participants; however, the differences were not statistically significant.

IV. DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress among children living in single-parent families. The results indicated that emotional suppression had a small but significant positive relationship with frustration tolerance, while frustration tolerance showed a significant positive correlation with psychological distress. These findings partially support previous research suggesting that emotion regulation strategies play an important role in children's psychological adjustment. Emotional suppression is often used as a strategy to control emotional expression; however, excessive reliance on suppression may limit healthy emotional processing and contribute to psychological difficulties over time (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003). Research has consistently shown that suppression is associated with increased negative affect, lower well-being, and greater vulnerability to stress, particularly among adolescents and young individuals who are still developing adaptive emotion regulation skills (Braet et al., 2014; Paulus et al., 2021).

The significant association between frustration tolerance and psychological distress observed in this study suggests that children who struggle to manage frustrating situations may experience higher levels of emotional difficulties such as anxiety, irritability, and depressive symptoms. Previous studies have also reported that low distress or frustration tolerance is linked with maladaptive coping behaviors and emotional instability (Jeffries et al., 2016; Li et al., 2025). Children raised in single-parent households may encounter additional environmental stressors, such as limited emotional support or increased family responsibilities, which may reduce their capacity to tolerate frustration effectively. Consequently, difficulties in coping with everyday challenges may intensify feelings of distress and negatively affect psychological well-being. Studies examining emotional development in adolescents further highlight that the ability to tolerate distress is a key protective factor against emotional and behavioral problems (Doan et al., 2018).

Regarding gender differences, the findings revealed that female participants reported slightly higher levels of emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress than males; however, these differences were not statistically significant. This result is consistent with several studies indicating that gender differences in emotional regulation strategies may exist but are not always strong enough to produce significant variations in psychological outcomes (Ma & Fang, 2019; Yang, 2020). The absence of significant gender differences in the current study may be explained by similar environmental conditions and shared experiences among male and female participants living in single-parent families. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of promoting adaptive emotion regulation strategies and strengthening frustration tolerance among children to reduce psychological distress and enhance emotional well-being.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study concluded that emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress are important psychological factors among children from single-parent families. The findings revealed that emotional suppression had a significant positive relationship with frustration tolerance, indicating that children who tend to suppress their emotions may develop certain coping mechanisms when dealing with frustrating situations. Additionally, frustration tolerance showed a strong positive correlation with psychological distress, suggesting that difficulties in managing frustration may increase the likelihood of experiencing anxiety, stress, and other emotional problems. Although female participants reported slightly higher levels of emotional suppression, frustration tolerance, and psychological distress than males, these differences were not statistically significant. Overall, the results highlight the importance of emotional regulation and coping abilities in shaping the psychological well-being of children in single-parent households and emphasize the need for psychological support and interventions to promote healthier emotional expression and resilience.

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