

Family Violence, Personality Characteristics and Aggression: A Psychosocial Study among Students in Wayanad District

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Abstract— Student aggression is one of the major concerns for teachers, parents, and psychologists in India. The present research explored the connection between family violence exposure and personality traits on aggression among students in Wayanad district of Kerala state. A cross-sectional survey was carried out with 400 participants (196 males and 204 females) aged 16 to 22 years enrolled in higher secondary schools and undergraduate colleges across all three taluks of the district through stratified random sampling technique. Students responded to Family Violence Exposure Scale (adapted from Revised Conflict Tactics Scales and ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool) scale, Big Five Inventory, and Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire. There was a positive correlation between family violence exposure and aggression ($r = .46, p < .001$). As regards personality factors, neuroticism had a positive correlation with aggression ($r = .41$), while agreeableness ($r = -.38$) and conscientiousness ($r = -.27$) showed negative correlations. Aggression scores were significantly higher for students who experienced high level of family violence than those exposed to moderate and low levels of family violence, $F(2, 397) = 63.43, p < .001, \eta^2 = .24$. Male students showed

higher aggression scores than females on total and physical aggression subscale. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that family violence exposure, neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness accounted for 37.0% variance in aggression, and neuroticism mediated the association between family violence exposure and aggression.

Keywords— Family violence, personality, Big Five, aggression, students, Wayanad, psychosocial factors

INTRODUCTION

Aggression is defined as the actions undertaken by one individual against another in order to inflict pain on the latter and who wishes to escape from the situation (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Such behaviour is of a physical, verbal, emotional, and cognitive nature. In teenagers and young adults, aggression is associated with poor academic achievement, peer rejection, alcohol consumption, delinquency, and problems in relationships in the future. School violence has become a major issue for schools, families, and policymakers in India.

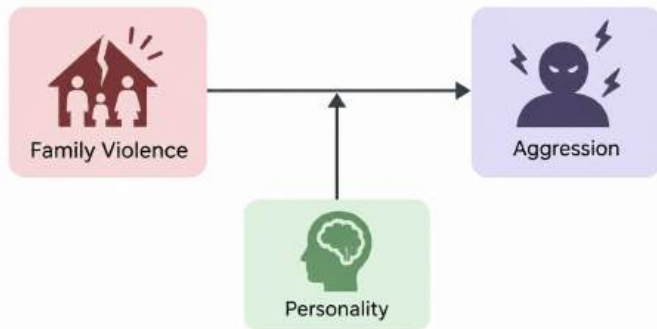


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

The first and the most important place where children learn social skills is their family. Seeing parents' conflicts and being subject to severe physical and mental punishments make them think that aggressive actions are the right way to solve any dispute. According to the social learning theory, aggressive behaviour can be learned by observation and imitation of significant role models, primarily parents (Bandura, 1973). "Cycle of violence" theory states that violent behaviour can occur as a result of victimization in childhood (Widom, 1989).

However, family violence cannot explain fully why certain children become aggressive while others do not. The personality variables are responsible for interpretation and reaction to stressful situations at home. Five-Factor Model defines the personality as five main traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experiences (John & Srivastava, 1999). Lack of agreeableness, lack of conscientiousness, and neuroticism have been proved to be predictors of aggressive behaviour (Miller & Lynam, 2001; Bettencourt et al., 2006).

Wayanad is a mountainous, mainly rural district situated in northern Kerala. There are several factors that cause stress in families living there: tribes inhabiting the area, agrarian lifestyle, crop failure, indebtedness, and migration of labour force. However, even though Kerala is considered to be doing quite good in terms of social indicators, national surveys show that there is spousal violence in the state (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2021). Little research has been done in relation to the effect of family violence and personality on aggression in students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family Violence and Aggression

The detrimental impact of witnessing family violence on the behavioral adjustment of children has been evidenced widely. In their review of family and community violence literature, Margolin and Gordis (2000) concluded that exposed children demonstrated increased externalizing problems, including aggressiveness and conduct problems. Kitzmann et al. (2003) found a meta-analytic correlation between inter-parental violence and poor developmental outcomes in children, with the outcomes being as bad as those observed in physically abused children. Wolfe et al. (2003) reported similar results and indicated that domestic violence exposure led to both emotional and behavioral disorders. In a study on the correlation between domestic violence and behavioral problems, Evans et al. (2008) established moderate correlations between exposure to domestic violence and externalizing behaviors, with the effect being stronger for boys compared to girls.

Aggression is promoted also by physical punishment. The meta-analysis of corporal punishment by Gershoff (2002) showed a consistent correlation between it and increased aggression and antisocial behavior, as well as decreased internalization of morality. Dodge et al. (1990) demonstrated that children who suffered from early physical mistreatment developed biased social information processing that involved attributing hostile intentions to others. This biased information processing, in turn, predicts aggressiveness.

In India, the problem of violence in families was investigated by Deb and Modak (2010) who found high levels of physical, psychological and sexual violence in families in the state of Tripura depending on socio-economic factors. According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), spousal violence was widespread in various states in India. It implies that many Indian children develop in families with high level of conflict (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

Personality Characteristics and Aggression

Personality traits refer to relatively stable individual patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that impact how people react to provocations. In their meta-analysis of structural personality models, Miller and Lynam (2001) found low agreeableness and low conscientiousness to be the most consistent predictors of antisocial behavior. Irritability and emotional reactivity were found to be predictors of aggression especially under provocations in Bettencourt et al. (2006)'s research. Low empathy, a trait related to agreeableness, was connected with committing crimes according to Jolliffe and Farrington (2004).

Neuroticism, which reflects emotional instability and anxious vulnerability to negative emotions, is connected with anger and hostility. People high in neuroticism experience stress intensely and have problems controlling their emotional reactions.

Integration of Environment and Personality

According to modern theories, aggression results from the interaction of individual and situational factors. The General Aggression Model posits that individual variables, like traits and beliefs, and situational variables, like provocation and stress, affect the process of developing internal states and aggressive behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Moffitt (1993) differentiated adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior and suggested that the latter results from the interaction of individual vulnerabilities and negative family environment. This interaction has been proven by Caspi et al. (2002).

Therefore, the literature provides evidence that family violence and personality are the important predictors of aggression and that the strength of the correlation between the former and the latter might be influenced by personality. However, very few studies have investigated the relationship between these variables in Indian students, and even fewer have been conducted in Wayanad.

Research Objectives

- To evaluate the level of family violence exposure, personality characteristics and aggression among students in Wayanad district.
- To investigate the gender differences in aggression and its dimensions.
- To analyze the correlation between family violence exposure, personality traits and aggression.
- To determine the predictors of aggression among students.
- To investigate if neuroticism moderates the correlation between family violence and aggression.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Male students will score significantly higher on aggression than female students.

H2: Family violence exposure will be positively correlated with aggression.

H3: Neuroticism will be positively correlated with aggression, and agreeableness and conscientiousness will be negatively correlated with aggression.

H4: Students with higher family violence exposure will demonstrate significantly higher aggression.

H5: Family violence and personality traits will significantly predict aggression, and neuroticism will moderate the correlation between family violence and aggression.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design adopted for this research was a quantitative cross-sectional correlational survey design.



Fig. 2. Research Methodology

Participants

A total of 400 students with an age range of 16 to 22 years (M=18.6, SD=1.9) from higher secondary schools and undergraduate colleges of Wayanad district formed the sample. The sampling method adopted was stratified random sampling wherein the strata were the three taluks of the district namely Mananthavady, Sulthan Bathery and Vythiri. Random selection of institutions from these taluks and random selection of participants from the class registers of the selected institutions were done.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 400)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	196	49.0
	Female	204	51.0
Age group	16–18 years	212	53.0
	19–22 years	188	47.0
Level of education	Higher secondary	180	45.0
	Undergraduate	220	55.0
Residence	Rural	268	67.0
	Urban	132	33.0
Family type	Nuclear	284	71.0
	Joint	116	29.0
Taluk	Mananthavady	132	33.0
	Sulthan Bathery	136	34.0
	Vythiri	132	33.0

Tools Used

Personal Data Sheet. This sheet collected data on gender, age, level of education, place of residence, type of family, and taluk.

Family Violence Exposure Scale. This scale is composed of 20 questions which have been taken from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus et al., 1996) and ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool (Zolotor et al., 2009). The tool evaluates exposure to witnessed inter-parental violence, psychological aggression and physical punishment. Respondents rate each item on a four-point frequency scale (0 = never to 3 = very often), resulting in possible scores from 0 to 60. Scores are categorized as low (0–19), moderate (20–29) and high (30 and above). The scale has been translated into Malayalam and then back-translated. The Cronbach's alpha in the present sample is .86.

Big Five Inventory (BFI). This scale includes 44 items and measures five dimensions of personality - extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness on a five-point scale. The mean item scores have been used. Alpha values vary between .72 and .80.

Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (AQ). This scale includes 29 items and assesses physical aggression (9 items), verbal aggression (5 items), anger (7 items) and hostility (8 items). The scores range between 29 and 145. Cronbach's alpha

for the overall scale is .88 and varies between .71 and .83 for subscales.

Procedure

Permission was taken from the heads of the selected institutions. Questionnaires have been administered in class in groups of 30 to 40 students during regular time slots and lasted about 40 minutes. The purpose of the study has been explained to the participants, and assurance of confidentiality has been provided.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent has been received in writing from the students aged 18 and above. Written consent of parents and assent of students has been received in case of participants younger than 18. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. In view of the sensitive nature of the family experiences being assessed, the contact details of district counselling services and school counselors have been provided to all participants.

Statistical Analysis

The analyses have been carried out with the use of SPSS. Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test, one-way ANOVA with Tukey's post-hoc test, Pearson's correlation and hierarchical multiple regression were performed. In the moderation analysis, scores for family violence and neuroticism were mean-centered prior to calculation of interaction term. Significance level was $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Study Variables (N = 400)

Variable	Mean	SD	Possible Range	Cronbach's α
Family violence exposure	18.42	9.36	0–60	.86
Extraversion	3.28	0.64	1–5	.78
Agreeableness	3.61	0.58	1–5	.72
Conscientiousness	3.47	0.62	1–5	.76
Neuroticism	2.94	0.71	1–5	.80

Openness	3.52	0.60	1–5	.74
Physical aggression	20.36	6.12	9–45	.83
Verbal aggression	14.18	3.64	5–25	.71
Anger	19.72	5.08	7–35	.77
Hostility	22.58	5.46	8–40	.79
Total aggression	76.84	15.27	29–145	.88

Of the 400 students, 210 (52.5%) reported low family violence exposure, 124 (31.0%) reported moderate exposure and 66 (16.5%) reported high exposure. The mean total aggression score of 76.84 falls in the moderate range of the scale.

Gender Differences in Aggression

Table 3: Gender Differences in Aggression and its Dimensions

Variable	Male (n = 196) M (SD)	Female (n = 204) M (SD)	t (398)	p	Cohen's d
Physical aggression	22.14 (6.31)	18.65 (5.46)	5.92	< .001	0.59
Verbal aggression	14.52 (3.71)	13.85 (3.55)	1.85	.065	0.18
Anger	19.84 (5.21)	19.60 (4.96)	0.47	.638	0.05
Hostility	23.12 (5.58)	22.07 (5.30)	1.95	.052	0.19
Total aggression	79.62 (15.84)	74.17 (14.26)	3.62	< .001	0.36

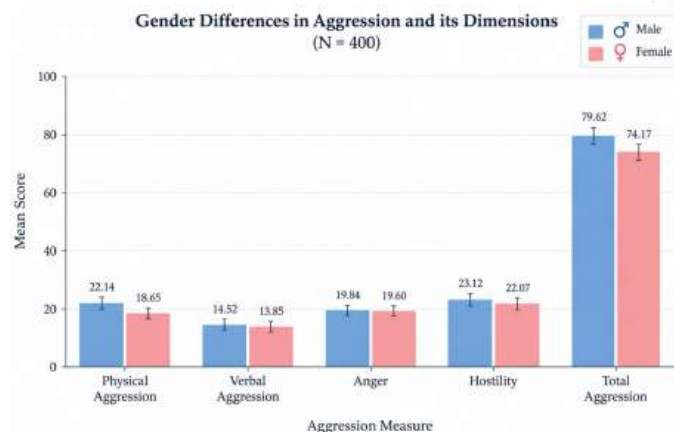


Fig. 3. Gender differences in aggression and its dimensions among students (N = 400).

Male students scored significantly higher than female students on total aggression and physical aggression. Gender differences in verbal aggression, anger and hostility were not significant. H1 was therefore supported for total and physical aggression.

Relationship among Family Violence, Personality and Aggression

Table 4: Pearson Correlations among Study Variables (N = 400)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Family violence	—						
2. Extraversion	-.04	—					
3. Agreeableness	-.21**	.18*	—				
4. Conscientiousness	-.16**	.15*	.31*	—			
5. Neuroticism	.29*	-.22**	-.34**	-.28**	—		
6. Openness	-.03	.26*	.19*	.17*	-.09	—	
7. Total aggression	.46**	.08	-.38**	-.27**	.41**	-.06	—

**p < .01

Family violence exposure showed a moderate positive correlation with total aggression ($r = .46$), which supports H2. Neuroticism was positively correlated with aggression ($r = .41$), and agreeableness ($r = -.38$) and conscientiousness ($r = -.27$) were negatively correlated with it, which supports H3. Extraversion and openness were not significantly related to aggression. Family violence was also positively related to neuroticism ($r = .29$) and negatively related to agreeableness ($r = -.21$).

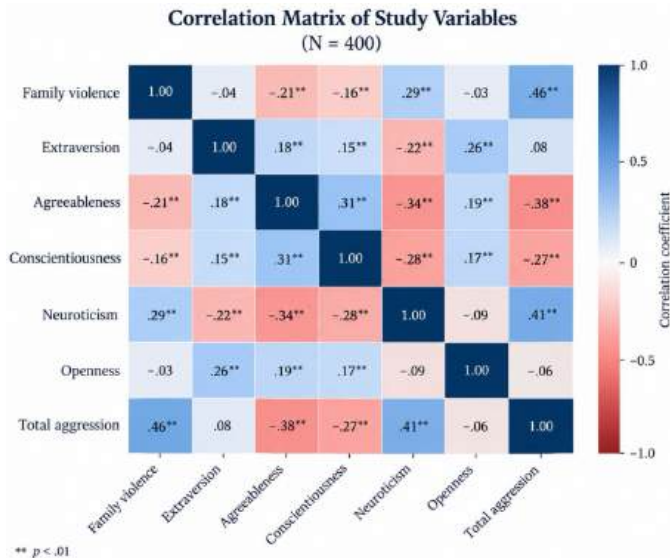


Fig. 4. Correlation matrix of family violence exposure, personality traits, and aggression.

Table 6: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Total Aggression

Step	Predictor	β (final model)	R ²	Δ R ²	F	ΔF
1	Gender (male = 1)	.14**	.035	.035	7.20*	7.20**
	Age	-.05				
2	Family violence	.31**	.235	.200	40.55***	103.50***
3	Neuroticism	.22**	.355	.120	36.05***	24.37**
	Agreeableness	-.19**				
	Conscientiousness	-.10*				
4	Family violence $\times$ Neuroticism	.12**	.370	.015	32.89***	9.33**

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001; final model adjusted R² = .359

Together, gender and age accounted for 3.5% of the variance in aggression. Addition of family violence accounted for an extra 20.0%, and adding the three personality variables accounted for 12.0%. Moderation effect of family violence and neuroticism accounted for 1.5% (p = .002). Thus, the final model accounted for 37.0% of the variance in aggression. Family violence turned out to be the most significant predictor ($\beta = .31$), followed by neuroticism ($\beta = .22$) and agreeableness ($\beta = -.19$).

According to simple slope analysis, the relationship between family violence and aggression was more pronounced for students high in neuroticism (+1 SD; $\beta = .43$, p < .001) compared to students low in neuroticism (-1 SD; $\beta = .19$, p < .01). H5 was confirmed.

DISCUSSION

In this research, we have looked at the role of family violence exposure and personality characteristics in aggression among students of Wayanad district. The findings have demonstrated that both the family environment and personality contribute greatly to the aggression of students.

The strongest predictor of aggression turned out to be family violence exposure. This is in agreement with social learning

Aggression across Levels of Family Violence Exposure

Table 5: One-way ANOVA of Total Aggression by Family Violence Level

Family Violence Level	n	Mean	SD
Low	210	70.48	12.85
Moderate	124	80.26	13.55
High	66	90.66	14.40

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Between groups	22550.30	2	11275.15	63.43	< .001	.24
Within groups	70571.00	397	177.76			
Total	93121.30	399				

Aggression rose steadily with family violence exposure. Tukey's post hoc test showed that all pairwise differences were significant (p < .001). Students in the high exposure group scored about 20 points higher than those in the low exposure group. H4 was supported.

Predictors of Aggression

theory (Bandura, 1973) and a meta-analysis on the correlation of domestic violence exposure with externalising problems (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Evans et al., 2008). Students who frequently observe or experience domestic violence may learn that aggression is a common way to cope with conflicts. A gradual increase of aggression level according to the increasing family violence level supports the dose-response relationship, which means that the accumulation of family violence is also important (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). In addition, harsh physical punishment is also one of the reasons, as Gershoff (2002) has established the association of the corporal punishment with aggression.

Family violence and personality characteristics have accounted for additional variance. Neuroticism and lack of agreeableness turned out to be the strongest trait predictors, along with the lack of conscientiousness. It is in accordance with Miller and Lynam (2001), who pointed out the consistency of antisocial behaviour correlates in the form of low agreeableness and low conscientiousness, as well as with Bettencourt et al. (2006), who found the connection of emotional sensitivity with aggression. Students with neurotic traits may be more susceptible to frustration. Also, students low in agreeableness may lack the necessary empathy and cooperativeness to avoid hostile reactions (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004). Extraversion and openness were not associated with aggression, which implies that sociability and intellectual curiosity are mostly unrelated to aggressive tendencies.

The moderation effect is quite an important finding. The association between family violence and aggression was twice stronger among students with high levels of neuroticism compared to students with low levels of neuroticism. It supports interactionist theories, like the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) and the developmental theory proposed by Moffitt (1993), which state that the vulnerability of individuals enhances the impact of their environment. Also, family violence was correlated with higher levels of neuroticism and lack of agreeableness. It can mean that a violent home environment affects personality development, but the cross-sectional nature of the study doesn't allow causal interpretation.

The gender difference was observed only in physical aggression and not verbal aggression, anger and hostility. This is consistent with the results of earlier research which stated that males tend to demonstrate physical expression of aggression, whereas the emotional and cognitive aspects are rather similar for both males and females (Buss & Perry, 1992).

In the context of Wayanad, economic uncertainty in farming families, alcohol abuse and labour migration can increase the family burden and partially explain the proportion of students reporting family violence exposure.

Implications

These results are practically significant for schools, counsellors and policy-makers. The programmes of school counselling should include regular and confidential screening of family violence exposure, with referral of the students to supportive services. The interventions should include training in anger management and emotional regulation, with focus on students with high levels of neuroticism. The programmes promoting non-violent discipline and constructive conflict resolution can be provided through local self-government bodies, Kudumbashree networks and parent-teacher associations. Also, culturally appropriate intervention is required for tribal and rural communities of the district.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Cross-sectional design does not allow drawing any conclusions about causation. All the data were self-reported, which makes them subject to social desirability and recall biases, especially concerning family experience. The current sample consisted of students in the formal education, thus, those who dropped out and probably experienced more adversity were excluded from the sample. Future researches should use longitudinal design, parental and teacher reports and include comparison of tribal and non-tribal students. Mediators should also be considered, such as hostile attribution bias, emotion regulation and peer influence.

CONCLUSION

Exposure to family violence and personality characteristics have jointly and significantly predicted aggression among students of Wayanad district. The strongest predictor turned out to be family violence. Neuroticism, lack of agreeableness and conscientiousness have also contributed, along with the enhanced moderating effect of neuroticism on the family violence – aggression association. Male students had higher levels of physical aggression compared to female students. Therefore, in order to reduce student aggression, actions on two levels are required – safe home environment and development of the skills of emotion regulation and prosocial behaviour among students.

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