

Psychological Safety and Emotional Regulation in Families

Rishabh Iyer Kochhar^{1*}

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of psychological safety in familial relationships and its impact on emotional regulation, analyzing how a psychologically safe environment fosters healthy emotional expression, secure attachment, and adaptive conflict resolution. By drawing from research across multiple disciplines, this study seeks to establish the critical role of psychological safety in shaping emotional resilience and well-being within families, through 3 separate lenses, and then a connection of the conclusion, and findings with India as a demographic.

Keywords: *Psychological Safety, Emotional Regulation, Families*

The term ‘psychological safety’ was coined by William Kahn in 1990. In his paper Kahn described it as “the sense of being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career”. Before this idea, the concept of psychological safety was deeply rooted in Carl Rogers’ humanistic psychology, which emphasised the importance of a supportive and accepting environment for personal growth. However, the concept of psychological safety was largely popularised by Amy Edmonson, in her paper, “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams.” She expanded the discipline’s scope to team dynamics, demonstrating that psychological safety enhances collaboration, learning, and adaptability in professional settings. Her research also highlighted how environments that discourage open communication and emotional expression lead to anxiety, reduced innovation, and emotional suppression. Beyond just workplace psychology, psychological safety has also been garnering attention and recognition in developmental and family psychology, where theories like the Attachment Theory, posited by John Bowlby, and further research conducted by Mikulincer and Shaver emphasize that individuals raised in emotionally safe environments develop better-coping mechanisms and emotional intelligence.

When it comes to psychological safety, and this paper, there are different terms which will be covered. The stipulative definitions of the same terms (in the context of this paper) is as follows:

1. Emotional suppression; An inhibition of the expression of emotions, often leading to internal distress and strained relationships.
2. Emotional Regulation; The ability to effectively manage and respond to emotional experiences.

¹Student, DPS International

*[Corresponding Author](#)

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3. Emotional Dysregulation; Difficulty managing emotional experiences.
4. Emotion Coaching; Parenting or interpersonal approaches where emotions are acknowledged, validated, and are guided constructively.
5. Attachment Theory; A framework suggesting that early relationships with caregivers can shape emotional bonds, affecting how people form connections.
6. Secure Attachment; A stable and trusting emotional bond.
7. Emotional Intelligence; The ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions effectively.
8. Conflict Resolution; Strategies used to address and resolve disagreements constructively.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY REDUCES EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION

A psychologically safe environment fosters open emotional expression, reducing emotional suppression in the long term. Emotional suppression, while oftentimes used as a coping mechanism, is a dangerous tendency, linked to increased stress, lower life satisfaction, and weakened interpersonal relationships. It occurs when one holds in their emotions, and feelings, or is unable to admit them openly. While they can lead to adverse consequences in a familial setting - both individually and collectively, it has also been shown that families which validate emotions rather than dismiss them create spaces where children and parents feel safe to express themselves. This ultimately leads to better emotional regulation and mental well-being. On the other hand, judgmental, dismissive or critical responses to emotional expression can induce suppression or even reinforce already existing suppression. This increases anxiety, depression, and relational difficulties in families. Investigations conducted by Gottman et al. highlight the benefits of “emotion coaching”, where parents actively acknowledge and guide their children through emotional experiences, resulting in stronger self-regulation skills. This section explores how psychological safety within families reduces emotional suppression and fosters healthier emotional regulation, through promoting emotional expression, in turn reducing the restraint placed on sharing emotions.

UNHEALTHY INTERACTIONS AS CAUSES OF EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION

A study by Gross and John found that individuals who suppress emotions frequently experience increased stress, lower life satisfaction, and weakened interpersonal relationships. The study’s conclusions posited that “expressive suppression was associated with lower levels of positive emotion, higher levels of negative emotion, and lower life satisfaction.” This reinforces how suppression impacts key demarcators of happiness, and affects individuals on a familial level gravely. Fig. 1.1 portrays the impact of inhibition of peer stress to parents and members of a family, as a cause of next day stress. The figure is the result of a study conducted by Wang et al. The methodology of the study is as follows: 310 seventh-grade adolescents

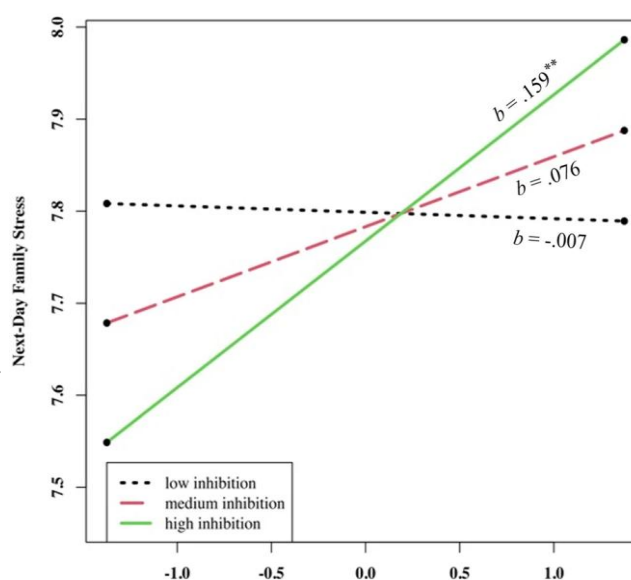


Fig. 1.1: Interaction of Peer Stress and Emotional Inhibition in Next-Day Family Stress

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from a public school in northeast China completed baseline surveys on emotion regulation, and then subsequently practiced 10 days of diary entries on daily peer and family stress. Emotion regulation was assessed using the Children's Emotion Management Scales (CEMS), focusing on inhibition and dysregulation. Peer and family stress were recorded twice daily on 4-point scales. The figure clearly highlights the increase in emotional inhibition, with an increase in peer-stress, ultimately leading to next-day familial stress. This portrays the impact of emotional inhibition in children, and how the accumulation of stress within them can ultimately have a toll on the family as a whole rather than only the children. Other studies have also shown how suppression increases possible physiological stress responses, like higher heart rate and cortisol levels, which as a result, contribute to long-term emotional distress and lower life satisfaction; emotional dysregulation also occurs, in a way that is induced by the build-up of suppressed emotions which are not processed, but accumulated over time, creating symptoms commonly associated with depression, and anxiety.

Healthy Environments as Keys to Improve Emotional Regulation

The study further postulated that “individuals who habitually suppress emotions report fewer close relationships and receive less social support”, compared to those who do not suppress emotions. This may stem from the fact that those who suppress their emotions, in essence, are shutting themselves out from help, which reduces the effectiveness of any aid they might be offered, or are taking. Relating this to familial suppression issues might indicate that families which discourage members from expressing themselves inadvertently harm emotional bonds, and weaken the dynamic that exists in the family itself. The study also supports this notion, presenting that frequent suppressors had 17% less closer relationships and scored lower on measures of social connectedness, and that suppression correlated negatively with social support received. Gross and John advanced the Social Contagion Theory, which in this case, expresses how emotions, in their normal state, are social and openly transmitted, and their suppression can lead to disruption of natural emotional changes, making interactions feel superficial and less genuine. Fig. 2.1, a graph taken from a study conducted by Cai and Meng, portrays the various nuances that meet in order for emotional regulation or emotional lability to occur. The numbers in the graph represent standardized path coefficients or factor loadings, which indicate the strength and direction of relationships between variables. The strong negative coefficient (-0.98) between household chaos and social adjustment suggests that higher chaos leads to poorer adjustment. High positive coefficients (0.95, 0.96) show that poor social adjustment predicts aggression-related behaviors like anger aggression and sensitivity aggression respectively. A moderate coefficient (0.70) links household chaos to impaired emotion regulation. These values highlight how chaotic environments disrupt children's emotional regulation, leading to difficulties in social adjustment and increased behavioral problems. In these, one large factor is the household chaos, which can be translated to be the environment - which includes confusion, hubbub, and order. The graph supports that chaotic environments make it harder for children to manage their emotions, which, in turn, leads to poor behavior in social settings. With individuals in a family suppressing their emotions, distance can be created, and conversations can feel much more fake, because of the lack of emotions involved in such exchanges. Furthermore, suppression of emotions can lead to emotional or complete detachment, with the lack of interest associated with emotional suppression leading to a negatively affected relationship. This coldness between family members can create feelings of rejection in one another, damaging trust and communication.

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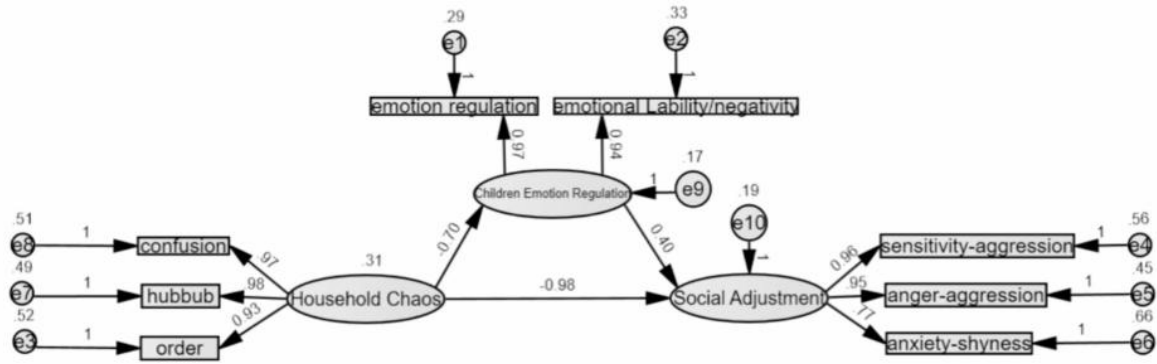


Fig. 2.1: Factors in emotional lability and regulation

Emotion Coaching as A Prerequisite for Self-Regulation Skills

Moreover, emotionally expressive individuals experience greater interpersonal benefits which supports how open emotional expression, especially in a familial setting, allows for longer, positive, and better-lived interactions between members. In agreement, the psychologists affirm that “those who express emotions openly tend to experience more positive social interactions, greater relationship satisfaction, and increased emotional support from others.” This might be attributed to how the expression of emotions indirectly enhances social support, relationship quality, and overall emotional resilience, affecting a family positively in the long run. Emotion expression ends the inhibition chain – of emotional suppression shutting out external help, which worsens the emotional state, which leads to more emotional suppression – by allowing individuals to reach out for help, which as a result, improves their emotional state and reduces feelings of isolation or dissatisfaction.

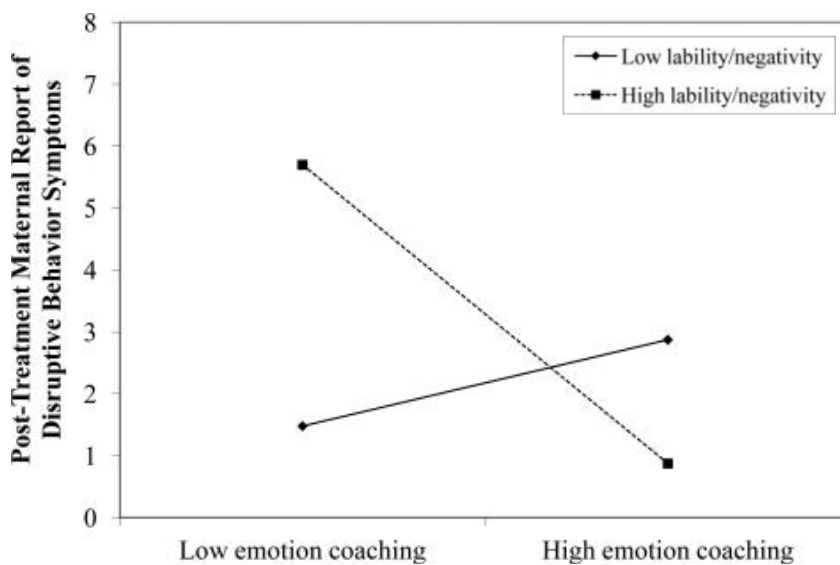


Fig. 3.1: Maternal reports indicating reduced disruptive behaviors with high emotion coaching.

Fig. 3.1 portrays multiple conditions, with children either having higher or lower emotion coaching, and higher or lower lability / negativity. This study, conducted by Dunsmore et al, clearly supports that in low emotion coaching, with more cases of high lability children, the amount of disruptive symptoms reported by mothers is much higher compared to higher emotion coaching with children who also have high

lability. This aligns with the conclusions of the aforementioned studies, and points posited by this paper, portraying the importance of emotion coaching, as well as the maintenance of a positive attitude from the outset in allowing for reduced disruptive behavior in children, as well as better familial interactions. Furthermore, another study conducted by Karnilowicz et al. highlights the opposite of this effect.

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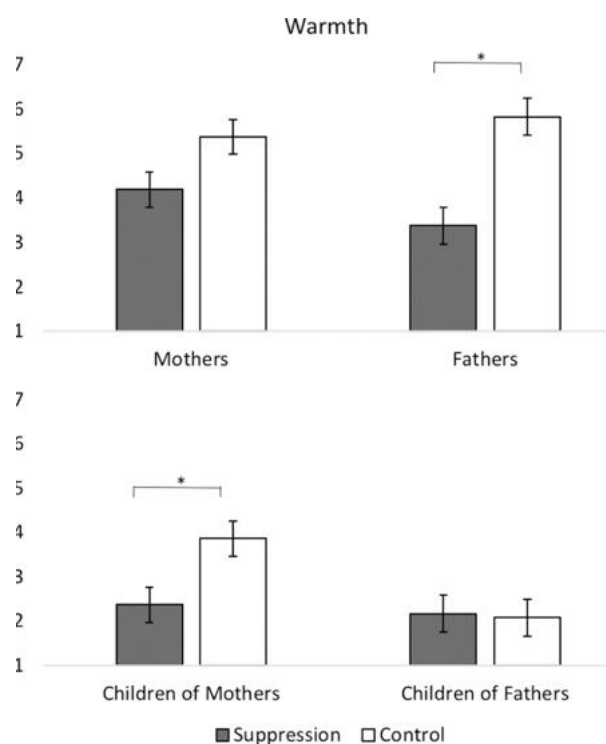


Fig. 3.2: Impact of emotional suppression on perceived warmth

The Fig. 3.2 highlights the negative impact of parental emotional suppression on both parent-child interactions and a child's development of emotional regulation skills. Through the suppression of these emotions, parents inadvertently model unhealthy emotional regulation strategies, reducing their ability to coach children effectively in managing emotions. The graph clearly shows that parental emotional suppression reduces observed warmth during interactions. Suppressing fathers displayed significantly less warmth than control fathers, while suppressing mothers' children exhibited reduced warmth, even though the mothers' warmth remained unaffected. The perceived warmth from children was also reduced with an increase in emotional suppression in children, further hinting at the fact that emotional suppression can hamper parent-child interactions, and cause long-term, unhealthy influences and tendencies to arise.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY STRENGTHENS SECURE ATTACHMENT

Psychological safety within families strengthens secure attachment, enhancing emotional regulation. It forms the foundation for strong, secure attachment between parents and children. Secure attachment, describes a parent-child relationship where the child is able to feel safe, comforted, and is able to rely on their parent for emotional support, reassurance, and care. This, as a result, leads to a heightened sense of security and trust in relationships. There are 3 major research studies which have contributed to this understanding. Firstly, John Bowlby's attachment theory highlighted the intrinsic role of secure attachment in emotional regulation. He suggested that securely attached individuals are able to manage emotions more effectively than those with insecure attachment. Secondly, a study done by Mikulincer and Shaver also found that secure attachment was linked to greater emotional intelligence and coping strategies. A third study by Laurent et al. (2015) further demonstrated that adolescents raised in secure environments exhibited lower cortisol levels during emotional distress, providing physiological evidence of the protective effects of

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secure attachment on stress management. Together, these studies underscore the profound influence of secure attachment on emotional regulation and resilience.

SECURE ATTACHMENT LEADS TO BETTER EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Bowlby developed Attachment Theory - a theory which explains how early relationships between children and caregivers play a key in the shaping and formation of emotional and social development in a child. In his investigation, he argued that secure attachment - consistent, responsive caregiving - helps children develop strong emotional regulation and healthier relationships. Secondly, that insecure attachment - neglect and unresponsiveness - leads to poor emotional regulation, and unhealthy relationships. His study highlighted the long-term impact of childhood attachment on emotional well-being. It emphasized the importance of stable, supportive environments in fostering emotional health, and establishing a prerequisite or foundation for future relationships. A study by Maalouf et al. aimed to investigate the association between attachment dimensions and anger expression (trait anger, hostility, physical aggression, and verbal aggression) among a sample of Lebanese adolescent participants. They measured attachment through the Relationship Questionnaire. The RQ has 4 subscales, secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing. Participants were asked to rate their attachment on a scale of 1-7, with one being the most like them. Higher scores in the secure subscale showed a stronger secure attachment style.

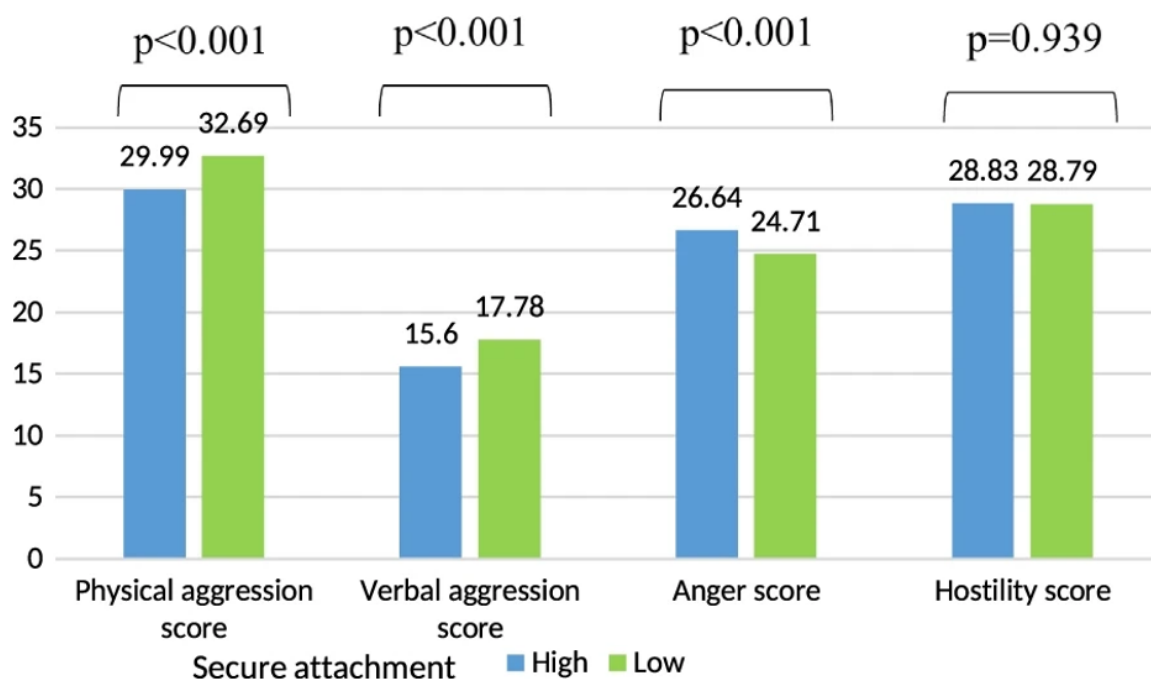


Fig. 4.1: Aggression in securely attached vs insecurely attached environments

Figure 4.1 shows the findings of the study conducted by Maalouf, comparing physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility scores between individuals with high vs. low secure attachment. They further postulated that higher levels of secure attachment led to lower aggression in some domains. Furthermore, students with high secure attachment scored lower in physical aggression (29.99 vs. 32.69), verbal aggression (15.6 vs. 17.78), and anger (26.64 vs. 24.71) compared to those with low secure attachment (green bars). This can provide support for the fact that secure attachment is significantly linked to reduced aggression in these areas. Moreover, the p-values (< 0.001) indicate these differences are

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statistically significant. Finally, there was no difference in hostility levels between individuals with secure vs. insecure attachment. This could provide support that although the hostility levels of both groups (28.83 vs. 28.79) are almost same, the insecure group lashes out, and expresses their aggression more than the secure group.

SECURE ATTACHMENT LEADS TO HIGHER EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Secure attachment provides a psychological foundation that enhances emotional intelligence and equips children with effective coping mechanisms. Those with secure attachment styles tend to experience lower stress levels, regulate emotions more effectively, and employ problem-focused coping strategies in challenging situations. This contributes to overall psychological resilience and interpersonal success. A study published in *Personality and Individual Differences* by Karreman and Vinghoets investigated the associations between several attachment styles and psychological well-being. The study emphasized the mediating roles of emotion regulation and resilience. The researchers found that individuals with a secure attachment style were more likely to utilize cognitive reappraisal— a healthy coping mechanism, or adaptive emotion regulation strategy— and displayed higher levels of resilience, which contributed to enhanced psychological well-being in those individuals. Conversely, those with insecure attachment styles relied on less effective strategies and displayed lower resilience, leading to reduced well-being. This highlights the critical role of secure attachment in developing emotional intelligence and creating effective coping mechanisms.

SECURE ATTACHMENT LEADS TO LOWER STRESS

Adding to the previous installation, adolescents that are raised in secure environments also show lower cortisol levels while they handle emotional distress. Laurent et al. conducted a study examining the relationship between secure attachment and physiological stress responses in adolescents. The researchers measured cortisol levels - a stress hormone and key biomarker of stress - before, during, and after a stress-inducing task in a sample of adolescents with varying attachment histories. They did this through analyzed data from diverse groups - including mother-infant pairs, depressed adults, and healthy adults - who underwent various stress-inducing tasks. They collected salivary cortisol samples before and after these tasks, Through a form of analysis they identified two primary components: 'total cortisol production' and 'change in cortisol levels,' both of which accounted for a very high percentage (around 85) of the variance present. This suggests that these 2 components were the most affected, and that other components may be redundant. Their findings revealed that adolescents who had been raised in secure environments exhibited significantly lower cortisol reactivity compared to those with insecure attachment histories. Specifically, secure attachment in these adolescents showed a 20–30% lower peak in cortisol levels during stress-inducing situations, which might key into a more adaptive physiological response to emotional distress. Additionally, the cortisol levels of those with secure attachment returned to normal much quicker than those without secure attachment, which supports enhanced stress recovery due to this positive form of attachment. These results support the idea that a secure environment fosters better emotional regulation by reducing the intensity and duration of physiological stress responses. Figure 5.1 highlights the cortisol levels in men and women in situations of secure attachment, and insecure attachment. The graph shows that insecurely attached females have higher cortisol levels, while insecurely attached males show lower levels compared to their secure counterparts. This difference likely stems from gendered coping, where females tend to be more emotionally expressive and relationally sensitive, leading to heightened stress responses. Males often suppress emotion, which may blunt cortisol activation. Thus, lack of psychological safety affects stress regulation

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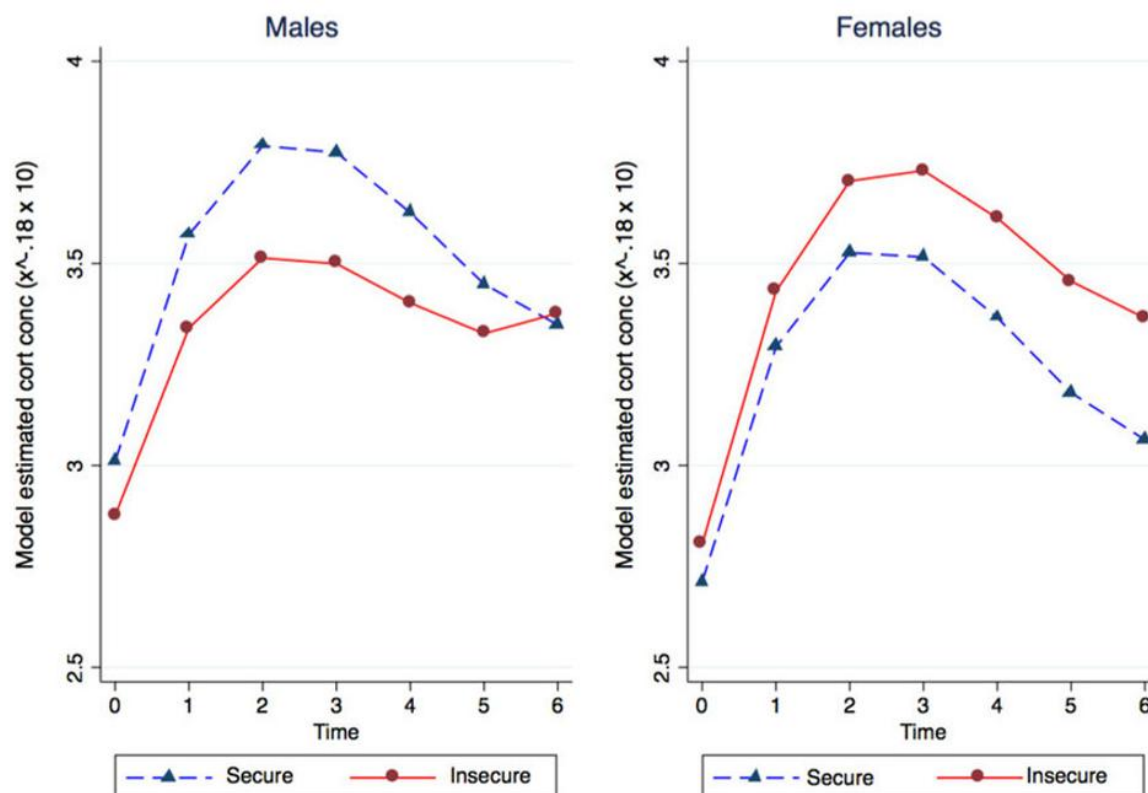


Fig. 5.1: Cortisol levels in women and men in secure vs. insecure attachment

differently across sexes. Keeping only the female part of the spectrum in mind, we can conclude that secure attachment leads to reduced cortisol levels compared to insecure attachment, which ultimately leads to reduced stress.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY PROMOTES ADAPTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Psychological safety within families promotes adaptive conflict resolution which, as a result, reduces long-term emotional dysregulation. This conclusion supports that when family members feel emotionally safe, they are more likely to go about disagreements with empathy, clarity, and emotional control. This fosters open communication and prevents cascading patterns of avoidance, escalation, or emotional shutdown. There will be three main studies discussed that support this claim. Firstly, a study by Gottman and Levenson studied marital conflict and found that couples who experienced psychological safety resolved disagreements more constructively, experiencing less emotional distress. Furthermore, Bowen's family systems theory posited that families lacking psychological safety have increased chances of chronic anxiety and emotional cutoff, both of which impair long-term emotional regulation. Finally, Repetti et al. showed that children raised in emotionally unsafe, high-conflict homes displayed greater emotional dysregulation and elevated cortisol levels. Together, these studies point to psychological safety as a crucial factor in reducing the emotional harm of conflict and promoting healthier emotional development.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AIDS DISAGREEMENT HANDLING

Gottman and Levenson examined how psychological safety shapes conflict resolution in marital relationships. Their study revealed that when partners feel emotionally secure within the relationship, they engage in disagreements with greater composure, empathy, and mutual

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respect. Rather than resorting to defensiveness or emotional withdrawal. This is because couples in these relationships were more likely to use adaptive communication strategies that de-escalated tension. The presence of psychological safety reduced physiological markers of stress and lowered the emotional intensity of conflict, thereby preventing long-term emotional distress. This was supported by Laurent et al. as supported above. Their findings suggested how a secure emotional climate not only improves immediate conflict outcomes but also safeguards relational and emotional stability over time.

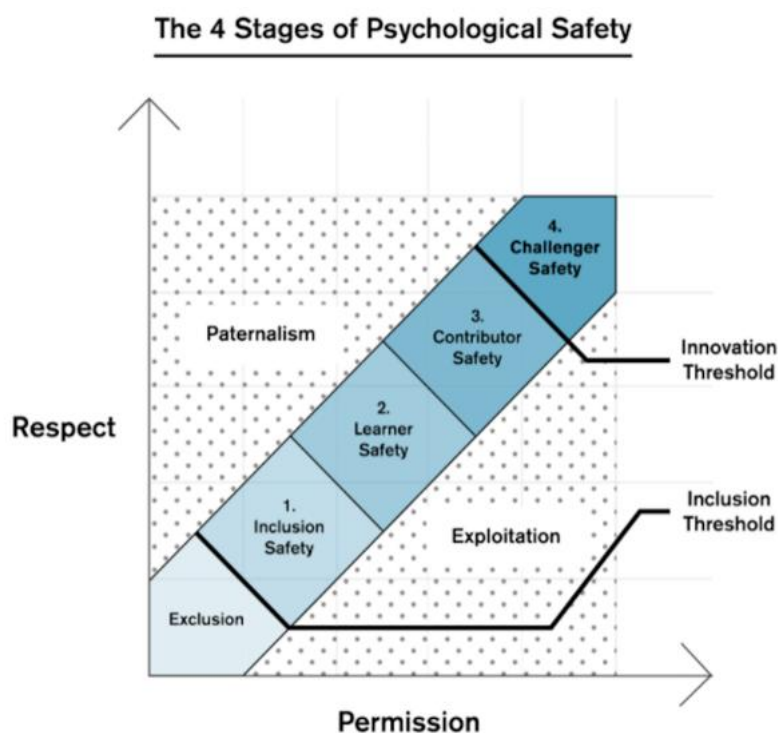


Fig. 6.1: The 4 pillars of Psychological Safety

Figure 6.1 provides a reason for this phenomenon. As one of the 4 main pillars of psychological safety, contributor safety allows for the constructive contributions from people inside a closed environment, without any fear of judgment, failure, or harmful negative critique from the listener. The increase of contributor safety, and thus lesser stigma related to speaking out, is what allows for better communication in a relationship - familial or otherwise. This idea explains one part of adaptive conflict management, which is the communication aspect.

PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNSAFE FAMILIES LEAD TO EMOTIONAL CUTOFF

Murray Bowen, through a series of clinical observations and longitudinal case studies, developed the Family Systems Theory to support and explain how emotional functioning operates across generations within families. He identified that in psychologically unsafe environments, which are often marked by high reactivity, poor boundaries, and emotional enmeshment, members often resort to emotional cutoff as a coping mechanism. Emotional cutoff is when a person isolates themselves emotionally and/or physically from significant others, often family, as a way to ignore unresolved emotional issues. It involves distancing from family members to manage unresolved tension. However, this detachment fosters

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chronic anxiety, as it prevents emotional resolution and healthy processing, ultimately impairing emotional regulation in both childhood and adulthood.

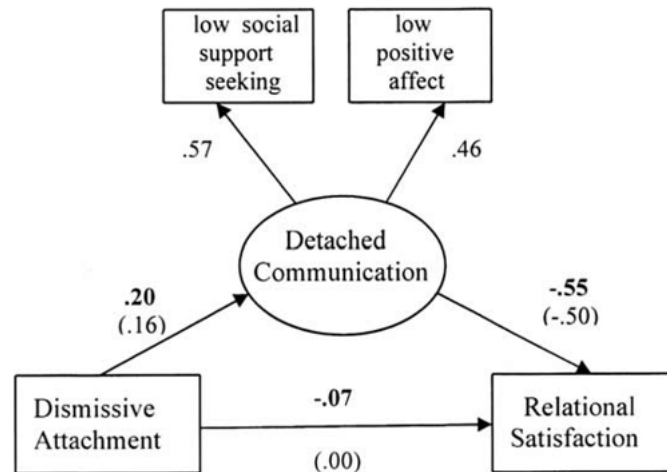


Fig. 7.1: Emotional detachment as result of psychological unsafety

Figure 7.1 illustrates that dismissive attachment indirectly reduces relational satisfaction by increasing detached communication. Detached communication, in turn, strongly predicts low social support seeking ($P = .57$) and low positive affect ($P = .46$), both of which contribute to significantly lower relational satisfaction ($P = -.55$) - which shows a direct negative relationship. This aligns with Bowen's theory, and further articulates the point that psychologically unsafe families foster emotional cutoff and detachment, which impair emotional regulation and diminish relationship quality.

HIGH CONFLICT HOUSEHOLDS REDUCE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



Fig. 8.1: Relationship between Conflict and Psychological Safety

Figure 8.1 highlights how work-family conflict indirectly impacts job performance through two key mediators: a person's psychological safety and psychological well-being. In the context of families, the model offers clues into how tensions at home can erode emotional positivity and productivity in broader areas. The path from Work-Family Conflict to Psychological Safety ($-.35$) suggests that when family dynamics are negatively affected, which is indicated by arguments, stress, or emotional distance, individuals feel less safe to express themselves, ask for support, or take interpersonal risks, even outside the family. The

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number -0.35 highlights the relatively medium negative correlation between both the variables. Secondly, the path from Work-Family Conflict to Psychological Well-Being (-0.14) shows that familial discord also slowly takes away an individual's emotional state, reducing resilience and increasing vulnerability to stress and burnout. While not as negatively correlated, this path also shows negative correlation. Repetti et al. examined how emotionally volatile and high-conflict family environments affect children's emotional development. Their findings revealed that consistent exposure to familial conflict leads to heightened cortisol responses and impaired emotional regulation in children, as did the study conducted by Laurent et al. When a home lacks psychological safety, conflict becomes a source of chronic stress rather than an opportunity for resolution. This supports how the absence of safe, constructive communication in family settings can hinder a child's ability to manage stressful situations, linking psychological safety directly to the development of adaptive conflict resolution skills, and a lack of psychological safety to a lack of conflict resolution.

CONCLUSION

The review of literature conducted through this paper can conclude the following - that the presence of psychological safety positively affects various emotional, and psycho-social factors in familial relationships. Furthermore, observing psychological safety within families through the lenses of attachment theory, communication, conflict resolution, and other nuanced frameworks, based and framed on the 4 pillars of psychological safety, this paper examined how emotionally secure environments shape adaptive emotional outcomes within families.

First, psychological safety reduces emotional suppression by fostering open expression and validating emotional experiences. This first finding has evidence from Gross & John (2003), Eisenberg et al. (1998), and Gottman et al. (1996), demonstrating that inclusive, emotionally conducive environments can enhance self-regulation and mitigate internal distress.

Second, that psychological safety strengthens secure attachment, laying a foundation for emotional resilience. This second finding can be supported through the research of Bowlby (1988), Mikulincer & Shaver (2016), and Laurent et al. (2015), validating learner safety, a component of psychological safety, as a key developmental factor for any human.

Third, that psychologically safe environments promote adaptive conflict resolution, preventing long-term emotional dysregulation. This third point has research by Gottman & Levenson (2000), Bowen (1978), and Repetti et al. (2002), all of which serve to support how families which support contributor safety engage in healthier disagreements, avoid emotional distancing, and foster stability.

Together, these insights affirm that psychological safety within families is a critical variable in the development of emotional regulation. Psychological safety should not be an ideal but rather a necessity for emotional health and social balance within familial systems.

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Conflict of Interest

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