

EMOTIONAL REGULATION AND FAMILY CONFLICT: A PSYCHONEUROIMMUNOLOGICAL APPROACH TO COUNSELLING INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract

Family conflict is a significant psychosocial stressor that influences both psychological well-being and physiological functioning. Although research has established links between stress and immune system changes, the psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship remain underexplored. The present paper adopts a descriptive and theoretical approach to examine emotional regulation as a key mediating process between family conflict and immune functioning. Drawing on psychoneuroimmunology, the paper explains how emotional regulation strategies influence stress responses and subsequent biological outcomes. A conceptual framework is proposed, highlighting the role of counselling-based interventions in improving emotional regulation and reducing stress-related health risks. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating psychological and biological perspectives to understand health outcomes in family contexts.
Keywords: Family Conflict, Emotional Regulation, Psychoneuroimmunology, Stress, Immune Functioning

Introduction

Stress is a fundamental biopsychological process that influences both mental and physical health. It occurs when individuals encounter challenging situations, known as stressors, which trigger physiological and psychological responses. One of the key biological responses to stress involves the activation of the body's defense systems, preparing the individual for a "fight or flight" reaction. Psychoneuroimmunology is an interdisciplinary field that explores the interaction between psychological processes, the nervous system, and immune functioning. It emphasizes how emotional experiences can shape physiological health outcomes. While stress has been widely studied in relation to immunity, many existing models describe a direct link between stress and biological changes without fully explaining the psychological processes involved. This paper suggests that emotional regulation serves as an important mediating factor in how family conflict influences immune functioning. Cognitive and appraisal-based theories of stress suggest that individual interpretation of stressors plays a critical role in determining emotional and physiological outcomes. This highlights the importance of emotional regulation in shaping stress responses arising from family conflict.

For conceptual clarity, main key terms used in this paper are defined as follows:

- Family conflict refers to persistent interpersonal tension, disagreement, or hostility within family relationships that contributes to psychological stress.
- Emotional regulation is defined as the processes through which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify their

emotional responses.

- Stress response refers to the psychological and physiological reactions triggered by perceived challenges or threats, primarily involving neuroendocrine activation.
- Immune functioning refers to the body's biological defense mechanisms that protect against illness and are influenced by stress-related physiological processes.

Objectives

- To study the psychological impact of family conflict
- To study emotional regulation as a mediating mechanism
- To study stress-related biological processes affecting immunity
- To study and propose a counselling-based conceptual framework

Significance

Brings together perspectives from psychology and immunology, making it useful for counselling and clinical practice. The proposed framework provides a foundation for future empirical research and may also guide counsellors, researchers, and families in understanding how emotional processes influence stress-related health outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Family conflict is a persistent source of psychological stress and is linked to negative mental and physical health outcomes. Although psychoneuroimmunology has established a connection between stress and immune functioning, most models explain this link in a direct way without adequately considering underlying psychological processes. Individuals exposed to similar family

environments often experience different emotional and physiological outcomes, suggesting that internal factors such as emotional regulation may play an important role. However, the role of emotional regulation as a mediating mechanism between family conflict and immune functioning remains underexplored in existing literature. This lack of a clear conceptual framework limits understanding of how interpersonal stress translates into biological outcomes and also restricts the development of effective counselling interventions. Therefore, this paper seeks to address this gap by positioning emotional regulation as a central mediating process linking family conflict and immune functioning.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper can be described as theoretical and descriptive in order to establish connections among the theories of emotional regulation, family conflict and psychoneuroimmunology.

Sources of Information

The starting point for the research includes a wide variety of peer-reviewed publications, established theories and reviews. Specific areas to be addressed in this paper include clinical and health psychology, particularly in terms of the role of emotional regulation and stress in immunological function.

Analytical Method

Unlike quantitative approaches which rely heavily on statistical information, this paper relies on conceptual synthesis. Existing literature has been carefully examined in order to demonstrate key patterns within these different disciplines.

Scope of Work

The purpose of this work is largely exploratory in nature and does not involve laboratory or field work. Unlike empirical studies, there is no particular hypothesis to be proved or disproved.

Review of Literature

The existing body of literature on stress, emotional processes, and health outcomes provides a strong foundation for understanding the psychological and biological effects of interpersonal stressors. Research in this area has expanded across family psychology, emotion regulation, and psychoneuroimmunology, highlighting the complex interplay between environmental stressors and internal regulatory processes. The following section reviews key theoretical and empirical contributions relevant to the present study.

Research consistently shows that the family environment plays a critical role in shaping psychological well-being across the lifespan. Individuals exposed to high levels of family conflict are more likely to experience chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation. The “risky families” framework explains that ongoing exposure to hostile, neglectful, or conflictual family environments contributes to long-term psychological and physiological dysregulation through continuous activation of stress-related systems

(Repetti et al., 2002). Similarly, research on family disruption indicates that adverse family experiences are linked to lasting emotional and behavioral difficulties that can persist into adulthood (Amato, 2000).

Early theoretical explanations of stress, particularly Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome, described stress as a nonspecific physiological response to environmental demands. This model outlined three stages—alarm, resistance, and exhaustion—highlighting the biological basis of stress reactions (Selye, 1956). However, later cognitive and psychological approaches broadened this view by emphasizing the role of appraisal, cognition, and emotional interpretation in shaping individual stress responses.

Within this broader perspective, emotional regulation has emerged as a key psychological mechanism. Gross (1998) introduced a widely accepted process model of emotion regulation, distinguishing between cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Cognitive reappraisal is generally linked to more adaptive psychological and physiological outcomes, whereas expressive suppression is associated with increased autonomic activation and stronger physiological stress responses. Later meta-analytic findings confirmed that maladaptive emotional regulation strategies are strongly associated with psychological distress and psychopathology, while adaptive strategies support healthier emotional and behavioral functioning (Aldao et al., 2010). More recent theoretical work further emphasizes that emotional regulation is a dynamic and flexible process that plays an important role in psychological resilience and adaptation across contexts (Gross, 2015).

Building on these psychological perspectives, biological frameworks further explain how stress responses influence physiological functioning.

From a biological perspective, psychoneuroimmunology offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how psychological stress influences immune functioning. Chronic stress activates the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, leading to increased cortisol secretion and subsequent changes in immune responses (McEwen, 2000). Prolonged activation of this system contributes to allostatic load, reflecting the cumulative physiological strain resulting from chronic stress exposure. Empirical research consistently shows that chronic psychological stress is associated with reduced immune functioning, increased inflammation, and greater susceptibility to illness (Segerstrom & Miller, 2004).

Further evidence suggests that early-life stressors, particularly within family environments, can lead to long-term immune dysregulation and increased vulnerability to disease across the lifespan (Fagundes et al., 2013). These findings highlight how psychological stress can become biologically embedded, shaping immune functioning through prolonged neuroendocrine activity.

Stress-related health outcomes are influenced not only by physiological mechanisms but also by interconnected

neurobiological and psychological pathways. Cohen et al. (2007) highlighted that stress affects health through multiple interacting systems, including endocrine, immune, and nervous system pathways. More recent psychoneuroimmunology research suggests that life stress impacts health through complex brain-body interactions involving cognitive appraisal and emotional processing systems (Slavich, 2016). These findings underscore the role of psychological interpretation and regulation in shaping physiological outcomes.

Despite strong evidence linking stress and immune functioning, individuals differ significantly in how they respond to similar environmental stressors. These differences are largely influenced by emotional regulation processes, which shape whether stress responses are intensified or reduced. However, existing literature tends to treat family conflict, emotional regulation, and immune functioning as separate areas, with limited effort to integrate them into a unified conceptual framework.

This lack of integration points to an important theoretical gap. In particular, there is limited explanation of how emotional regulation operates as a mediating mechanism between family conflict and immune functioning within a psychoneuroimmunological framework. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of how interpersonal stress translates into biological outcomes and for informing effective counselling-based interventions.

Proposed Conceptual Model

The proposed conceptual framework illustrates how family conflict influences immune functioning indirectly through emotional regulation processes, which determine whether stress responses are amplified or reduced.

Maladaptive Pathway

Persistent family conflict may lead to expressive suppression and avoidance. These strategies increase physiological arousal, prolong cortisol release, and contribute to allostatic load, which negatively affects immune functioning. For example, suppression of emotional responses during conflict may prolong physiological stress activation.

Adaptive Pathway

Cognitive reappraisal and acceptance help reduce emotional distress and restore physiological balance, thereby protecting immune functioning. For instance, cognitive reappraisal may help individuals interpret conflict in a less threatening manner.

Discussion

The present paper highlights emotional regulation as a key psychological mechanism linking family conflict and immune functioning. Family conflict acts as a chronic stressor that activates physiological stress systems, including the HPA axis and autonomic nervous system. However, the effects of this stressor depend largely on how individuals manage their emotional responses. Adaptive strategies can help reduce

physiological stress activation, whereas maladaptive strategies tend to intensify and prolong stress responses. This perspective aligns with the psychoneuroimmunological view that psychological processes are closely connected with biological functioning. Emotional experiences within family environments influence neuroendocrine activity, which in turn affects immune regulation. Thus, emotional regulation plays a central role in shaping whether family conflict results in adaptive or maladaptive health outcomes.

Implications of the Study

- **Theoretical:** This work reinforces the psychoneuroimmunology framework by establishing emotional regulation as a critical mediating variable.
- **Clinical:** The findings suggest that therapeutic interventions focused on emotional control can buffer the body against the physical damage caused by domestic stress.
- **Family Level:** Cultivating better communication and emotional literacy within the home can enhance both the mental and physiological health of all family members.

Limitations of the Study

Because this is a theoretical analysis rather than an empirical study, it cannot definitively establish a cause-and-effect relationship. The reliance on existing literature introduces potential inconsistencies due to varying research methodologies and definitions across the cited sources. Furthermore, the model does not fully integrate external variables—such as genetics, lifestyle choices, and broader environmental factors—which also play a significant role in shaping biological stress reactions.

Future Directions

Future inquiries should prioritize empirical testing of this proposed framework. Utilizing longitudinal studies and experimental designs would help clarify the causal links between domestic conflict, emotional processing, and immunity.

To increase objectivity, future research should incorporate specific biomarkers, including:

1. Cortisol levels (to track HPA activity).
 2. Inflammatory markers (to track immune response).
- Additionally, exploring how cultural backgrounds and developmental stages influence regulation strategies will provide a more nuanced understanding. Finally, intervention-based research could confirm the practical utility of this model in a counseling or clinical setting.
 - Biological markers such as cortisol levels and inflammatory indicators should be included to provide more objective evidence.
 - Future studies could also examine cultural and developmental differences in emotional regulation strategies.
 - Intervention-based studies may further validate the counselling applicability of the proposed model.

Conclusion

The present theoretical work integrates concepts from psychoneuroimmunology and emotional regulation to understand stress processes arising from family conflict. It emphasizes that interpersonal stress can extend beyond psychological experience and influence physiological functioning through established stress-response systems.

Emotional regulation is identified as a significant determinant in modulating this process, shaping how individuals respond to emotionally challenging family environments. From a counselling perspective, strengthening adaptive regulation strategies may contribute to improved stress management and better overall health outcomes.

The model proposed in this paper highlights the role of cognitive and emotional processes in influencing biological stress responses and helps explain variability in psychological and physiological outcomes.

This perspective supports an integrated understanding of mind-body interaction, where emotional experiences are closely linked with neuroendocrine and immune activity.

The findings further indicate that counselling interventions targeting emotional awareness and regulation may serve as both preventive and supportive strategies in managing stress-related difficulties.

At a broader level, the framework contributes to the growing recognition of psychobiological interactions in health sciences and underscores the importance of considering psychological mediators when examining the relationship between environmental stressors and immune outcomes.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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