

Effects of Family Structure and Parental Conflict on Adolescent Behavioral Adjustment in Some Selected Universities in Bamenda North West Region of Cameroon

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Abstract: Adolescence represents a pivotal stage of development characterized by heightened sensitivity to family dynamics, emotional experiences, and behavioral regulation. Family structure and parental conflict are increasingly recognized as critical determinants of adolescents' psychosocial functioning, particularly within academic environments. This study, entitled "Effects of Family Structure and Parental Conflict on Adolescents' Behavioral Adjustment in Some Selected Universities in Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon," investigates the extent to which variations in family structure and parental conflict influence the behavioral adjustment of adolescents in higher education. Drawing on ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner, attachment theory of Bowlby, and family systems theory of Minuchin, the study provides a multidimensional understanding of how family contexts shape adolescent behavior. A mixed methods research design was adopted, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The study population comprised undergraduate students, university administrators, and lecturers from selected faculties. A sample of 412 participants was used involving 360 students, 42 administrators, and 10 lecturers. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to students, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with administrators and focus group discussions with lecturers. This triangulation allowed for a nuanced exploration of both statistical trends and lived experiences. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations while inferential statistics included one-way ANOVA, Pearson's correlation, and multiple regression analysis. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim, coded, and thematically analyzed to highlight perceptions, narratives, and institutional insights on family-related behavioral issues. For descriptive results, students reported moderate levels of parental conflict ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.87$) on a 5-point scale, and behavioral adjustment scores indicated moderate levels of externalizing and internalizing symptoms ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.81$). Family structure was categorized as nuclear (50%), single-parent (27%), and separated/divorced (23%). Frequency analyses revealed that 61% of students from single-parent or separated/divorced families reported occasional or frequent difficulties with emotional regulation, peer interaction, or classroom engagement. For bivariate relationships, a significant negative correlation was observed between parental conflict and behavioral adjustment ($r = -0.48$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher parental conflict was associated with poorer behavioral outcomes. Family structure was also significantly related to behavioral adjustment, with students from separated or divorced families showing higher maladjustment scores ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.72$) compared to those from nuclear families ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.78$); ANOVA: $F(2,357) = 29.6$, $p < .001$. Multiple regression analysis predicting behavioral adjustment from family structure and parental conflict (controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic background) yielded a significant model ($R^2 = .35$, $F(5,354) = 37.8$, $p < .001$). Parental conflict emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = -0.44$, $p < .001$), followed by family structure ($\beta = 0.26$, $p = .003$). Mediation analysis further showed that parental conflict partially mediated the relationship between non-nuclear family structures and maladjustment (indirect effect = 0.14, 95% CI [0.07, 0.23]), accounting for 39% of the total effect. Thematic analysis of qualitative

interviews and FGDs revealed four dominant themes which are Emotional instability and academic disengagement, administrators reported higher rates of absenteeism, low motivation, and conduct issues among students experiencing high parental conflict. Role modeling and attachment disruptions, lecturers observed that adolescents from non-nuclear families often lacked stable emotional anchors. Institutional support gaps, administrators acknowledged limited psychosocial support services for students facing family-related stress. For resilience and coping, some students displayed adaptive coping mechanisms, facilitated by peer support groups and mentorship programs. Findings indicate that family structure and parental conflict significantly shape adolescents' behavioral adjustment, with higher conflict and non-nuclear structures associated with increased emotional and behavioral challenges. However, protective factors such as supportive peers, mentors, and university counseling structures can mitigate some of these adverse effects. This study contributes to the growing body of research on adolescent development within African university contexts by emphasizing the powerful influence of family dynamics on behavior. The results underscore the need for universities to implement structured psychosocial support programs, peer mentorship initiatives, and family-oriented counseling services. A holistic and ecological approach involving students, families, educators, and policymakers is essential to fostering healthier behavioral adjustment among adolescents. The findings have strong implications for mental health programming, university guidance services, and policy reforms targeting youth well-being in Cameroon and similar contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical developmental period characterized by profound biological, psychological, and social changes that shape personality, social adjustment, and behavioral patterns. This stage, typically spanning ages 10 to 24, represents a transition from childhood dependence to adult independence, involving increased autonomy, identity formation, and heightened sensitivity to family and peer dynamics (Steinberg, 2014; Arnett, 2015). As adolescents navigate this period, the family remains a primary context for socialization, providing emotional security, moral guidance, and behavioral modeling. However, when the family environment is destabilized through structural changes or persistent conflict, adolescents are at heightened risk of developing behavioral maladjustments, including emotional dysregulation, academic difficulties, and antisocial tendencies (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Family is widely recognized as the first and most influential socializing institution, shaping the child's personality, values, beliefs, and emotional stability (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the family constitutes the microsystem that directly interacts with the adolescent and lays the foundation for psychological well-being and behavioral regulation. In stable and supportive families, adolescents are more likely to exhibit adaptive behaviors, prosocial engagement, and resilience to external stressors (Lansford, 2009; Collins & Laursen, 2004). Conversely, when family relationships are disrupted through divorce, separation, or parental conflict the protective functions of the family may weaken, leading to emotional insecurity and behavioral disturbances (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Buehler et al., 2007). Family structure defined as the composition and organization of family members, such as nuclear, single-parent, or reconstituted families plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' developmental outcomes (Demo & Acock, 1996; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Research has consistently shown that adolescents from intact nuclear families tend to perform better in terms of academic achievement, emotional regulation, and social behavior compared to their counterparts from single-parent or divorced families (Sun & Li, 2009; Amato, 2000). Structural transitions in the family often introduce new stressors such as economic strain, parental absence, or role instability, all of which can affect adolescents' capacity for adaptive behavioral adjustment (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001).

Parental conflict, both overt and covert, constitutes another significant factor influencing adolescent adjustment. It refers to persistent discord, hostility, or tension between parents, whether or not it

leads to separation or divorce (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 1990). High levels of parental conflict expose adolescents to chronic stress, threatening their sense of security and undermining their emotional development (Harold et al., 2007; Davies & Cummings, 1994). Empirical evidence suggests that adolescents who experience high parental conflict exhibit higher levels of externalizing behaviors such as aggression, delinquency, and substance abuse, as well as internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression (El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1997; Grych et al., 2000; Rhoades, 2008). According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), parental conflict disrupts the formation of secure attachments, leaving adolescents emotionally vulnerable and prone to maladaptive coping strategies. Exposure to interparental discord can alter cognitive appraisals and emotional regulation, leading to heightened reactivity and difficulty in forming trusting relationships (Davies & Forman, 2002). Furthermore, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that adolescents may model aggressive or maladaptive behaviors observed during parental conflicts, normalizing hostility as an acceptable form of interpersonal interaction. This underscores why parental conflict is not merely a marital issue but a potent risk factor for adolescents' psychosocial well-being.

Behavioral adjustment refers to the process through which individuals align their behaviors with social expectations, norms, and personal developmental tasks (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). During adolescence, this involves the capacity to regulate emotions, maintain adaptive peer and family relationships, manage academic responsibilities, and navigate social demands (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). Behavioral adjustment is influenced by both individual characteristics (e.g., temperament, coping skills) and environmental factors such as parenting styles, family structure, and exposure to stress (Grusec & Davidov, 2007; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Adolescents exposed to stable family structures and low parental conflict typically show higher levels of adaptive adjustment, including self-regulation, prosocial behaviors, and academic engagement (Baumrind, 1991; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). In contrast, those from disrupted family environments or high-conflict households are more likely to display conduct problems, emotional instability, truancy, substance use, and difficulties forming healthy social relationships (Forehand et al., 1997; Amato & Afifi, 2006). Such behavioral maladjustments can persist into adulthood, increasing risks for psychiatric disorders, social exclusion, and reduced educational attainment (Kessler et al., 2005; Fergusson et al., 2007).

While a significant body of research on family structure and adolescent behavior originates from Western contexts, the dynamics in African settings, including Cameroon, present unique sociocultural dimensions. In many African societies, extended families and communal child-rearing practices play a central role in shaping adolescent development (Nsamenang, 2002; Serpell, 1993). Family structure transitions such as divorce, separation, or migration may therefore have distinct implications compared to nuclear family systems in Western contexts. For example, in the North West Region of Cameroon, economic hardship, urban migration, and sociopolitical instability have contributed to changing family configurations and increased parental strain (Fonyuy, 2017; Tamanjong & Ngwa, 2020). Research conducted in sub-Saharan Africa shows that adolescents from disrupted or single-parent households are more vulnerable to behavioral and emotional problems, including early school dropout, delinquency, and emotional distress (Mokomane, 2012; Shumba & Abosi, 2011). Moreover, high levels of family conflict in these contexts are often exacerbated by socioeconomic stress, limited access to counseling services, and cultural taboos surrounding divorce and separation (Nchinda & Fonchingong, 2014; Ananga, 2011). In university settings, these dynamics may manifest as reduced academic performance, mental health challenges, or maladaptive peer affiliations.

This study is anchored in three interrelated theoretical frameworks, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, and Family Systems Theory. The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasizes that adolescent behavior is shaped by multiple layers of environmental influence, with the family as a primary microsystem. Disruptions in family structure or conflict at this level can cascade into broader developmental consequences. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) highlights the centrality of stable, secure parent-child relationships for healthy

emotional and behavioral development. High parental conflict and unstable family structures undermine these bonds, leading to maladjustment. Family Systems Theory (Minuchin, 1974) conceptualizes the family as an interdependent system where conflict or structural disruptions in one subsystem affect the functioning of others, including adolescent behavioral outcomes. These theoretical lenses provide a multidimensional framework for understanding how structural and relational dynamics within families interact to shape adolescents' behavioral adjustment in university environments.

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are crucial stages for university students, often involving identity exploration, autonomy, and academic pressures (Arnett, 2000; Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002). For students from disrupted family structures or high-conflict households, these developmental tasks may be compounded by psychological distress, economic insecurity, and weakened social support (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000; Barry et al., 2009). Such vulnerabilities can manifest as externalizing behaviors (substance use, truancy) or internalizing problems (anxiety, depression), which undermine both academic and social functioning. In the Cameroonian context, university students often serve as transitional figures between their families and the larger society, bearing socio-economic responsibilities in addition to academic expectations (Fonyuy, 2017). Understanding how family structure and parental conflict influence their behavioral adjustment is therefore crucial for informing interventions, counseling services, and educational policies aimed at promoting student well-being and academic success.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Family structure, parental conflict, and behavioral adjustment are multidimensional constructs that have attracted significant scholarly attention across psychology, sociology, and education. Family structure refers to the composition and organization of family members living together and their relational dynamics (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Demo & Acock, 1996). Common family structures include nuclear families (two biological parents), single-parent families (one custodial parent), stepfamilies or blended families (reconstituted), and extended family households. Changes in family structure often result from divorce, separation, parental death, or migration, each of which has distinct developmental implications (Amato, 2000; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). Parental conflict is conceptualized as persistent discord, tension, or hostility between parents, whether or not the relationship ends in separation or divorce (Cummings & Davies, 2010). It may manifest as verbal hostility, withdrawal, physical aggression, or covert undermining. Adolescents exposed to chronic parental conflict are more likely to experience emotional distress, maladaptive coping, and behavioral problems (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Harold et al., 2007). Behavioral adjustment refers to the degree to which adolescents' behaviors are consistent with age-appropriate social norms, expectations, and psychological well-being (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). It involves both externalizing behaviors such as aggression, substance use, truancy and internalizing behaviors like anxiety, withdrawal, depression (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Poor behavioral adjustment is often an indicator of psychosocial stressors, including family instability and conflict.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory posits that human development is influenced by multiple environmental layers, with the microsystem (family) exerting the most immediate and powerful influence. Disruptions in family structure or heightened parental conflict at this level can cascade through other systems such as school and peer contexts affecting behavioral outcomes (Lansford, 2009; Collins & Laursen, 2004). Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory emphasizes that secure parent-child bonds are critical for healthy emotional regulation and adaptive behavior. Parental conflict and structural instability may disrupt these attachments, resulting in emotional insecurity and vulnerability to behavioral maladjustment (Davies & Forman, 2002; El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1997). Minuchin's (1974) Family Systems Theory views the family as an interdependent system. Conflict or disruptions in one subsystem (marital relationship) can affect adolescent functioning. Persistent interparental conflict may destabilize family boundaries, reduce emotional availability, and increase adolescents' exposure to maladaptive communication patterns (Buehler et al., 2007; Grych et al., 2000). Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory argues that

behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Adolescents exposed to parental conflict may model aggressive or maladaptive behaviors observed in the home. Over time, these behaviors can generalize to peer and academic contexts, contributing to externalizing behavior problems (Forehand et al., 1997; Grusec & Davidov, 2007).

Extensive research highlights differences in behavioral outcomes between adolescents raised in nuclear versus non-nuclear families. Adolescents from intact nuclear families generally demonstrate higher academic achievement, lower delinquency, and better emotional regulation (Amato, 2000; Sun & Li, 2009). In contrast, those from single-parent or divorced families are more likely to exhibit externalizing problems such as aggression, truancy, or substance use (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Sun and Li (2009) found that parental divorce significantly predicted lower academic performance and increased behavioral problems in adolescents. Similarly, Carlson and Corcoran (2001) reported that single-parent family structures were associated with both externalizing and internalizing behaviors in adolescents, particularly in low socioeconomic contexts. Family structure often interacts with socioeconomic factors to shape adolescent adjustment. Single-parent and reconstituted families frequently face economic hardships, time constraints, and reduced supervision, which can increase adolescents' exposure to risk behaviors (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Amato & Afifi, 2006). Research also indicates that parenting practices, such as authoritative parenting, can buffer some of the negative effects of non-nuclear family structures (Baumrind, 1991; Steinberg, 2001). In African contexts, extended families and communal child-rearing often provide alternative sources of emotional support and socialization for adolescents (Nsamenang, 2002; Serpell, 1993). While extended families may mitigate some risks associated with single-parent households, economic pressures and urbanization have weakened traditional support systems, especially in urban areas like Bamenda (Fonyuy, 2017; Tamanjong & Ngwa, 2020).

Numerous studies have shown that parental conflict directly contributes to adolescents' maladaptive behaviors. Cummings and Davies (2010) documented that chronic parental discord is associated with increased aggression, school truancy, and emotional distress. Grych et al. (2000) emphasized that both overt (verbal or physical aggression) and covert conflict (withdrawal, criticism) can disrupt adolescents' emotional security and coping mechanisms. Davies and Cummings (1994) proposed the emotional security hypothesis, asserting that parental conflict undermines children's emotional security, leading to heightened vigilance, anxiety, and externalizing behavior. Harold et al. (2007) further demonstrated that adolescents exposed to interparental conflict are at higher risk for depressive symptoms, substance abuse, and academic disengagement. The impact of parental conflict is mediated by factors such as coping strategies, parent-child relationships, and individual temperament (Davies & Forman, 2002; El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1997). Positive parent child communication and supportive parenting can buffer the negative effects of conflict, whereas poor communication exacerbates maladjustment (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Amato & Afifi, 2006). Gender and age also moderate outcomes, with younger adolescents often more vulnerable to emotional insecurity (Davies et al., 2002).

Longitudinal studies have linked parental conflict to long-term difficulties, including antisocial behavior, depression, and poor academic performance extending into adulthood (Fergusson et al., 2007; Kessler et al., 2005). Exposure to chronic conflict during adolescence is a predictor of relational difficulties, risky behavior, and psychological distress later in life. Externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, substance use, and delinquency, are commonly reported among adolescents from high-conflict or disrupted families (Forehand et al., 1997; Barry et al., 2009). Patterson's coercion model suggests that coercive parent child interactions escalate externalizing problems, which can spill over into peer and academic contexts (Patterson, 1982). In Cameroonian universities, anecdotal evidence links such behaviors to rising cases of substance abuse, truancy, and peer group deviance (Tamanjong & Ngwa, 2020). Internalizing behaviors such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal are also prevalent among adolescents experiencing family stressors (El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1997; Lansford, 2009). Emotional insecurity and disrupted

attachment can impair adolescents' ability to regulate negative emotions, resulting in long-term psychological distress (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Poor behavioral adjustment often correlates with academic underachievement, low school engagement, and poor peer relationships (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011; Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002). Adolescents from conflictual family backgrounds may have difficulties concentrating, reduced motivation, and increased absenteeism (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Fonyuy, 2017). African family structures are shaped by cultural norms, economic realities, and extended kinship networks (Nsamenang, 2002; Serpell, 1993). However, rapid urbanization, economic hardship, and political instability in Cameroon have led to increasing family disruptions (Fonyuy, 2017). Mokomane (2012) reports that adolescents from single-parent or separated households in sub-Saharan Africa are more prone to early school dropout, emotional distress, and delinquent behavior. In the North West Region of Cameroon, socio-political instability has exacerbated family separation, parental stress, and conflict (Nchinda & Fonchingong, 2014). University students from these family backgrounds often face compounded psychosocial challenges, including financial strain, limited parental guidance, and behavioral difficulties (Tamanjong & Ngwa, 2020).

Moreover, traditional cultural norms sometimes discourage open discussion of family issues, limiting access to psychosocial support (Ananga, 2011). As a result, many adolescents internalize stressors or express them through deviant peer affiliations, risky sexual behavior, or academic disengagement (Shumba & Abosi, 2011). The relationship between family structure, parental conflict, and behavioral adjustment is not uniform across all adolescents. Gender differences have been documented, with male adolescents tending to exhibit more externalizing behaviors, while females often display internalizing symptoms (Rhoades, 2008; Harold et al., 2007). Age also plays a role, younger adolescents may be more emotionally vulnerable to parental conflict due to less developed coping mechanisms, whereas older adolescents may exhibit more behavioral independence (Davies & Forman, 2002). Individual resilience factors such as coping strategies, peer support, and access to counseling can moderate these outcomes (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Barry et al., 2009). Peer networks, in particular, can act as protective or risk factors depending on their orientation and norms.

Empirical evidence suggests that targeted interventions can buffer the effects of family disruption and parental conflict. Effective interventions include parental education, counseling services, peer mentorship programs, and school-based psychosocial support (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Amato & Afifi, 2006). However, in many African universities, such services are limited or unevenly implemented (Fonyuy, 2017; Nchinda & Fonchingong, 2014). Despite growing research globally, there is a dearth of context-specific empirical studies exploring how family structure and parental conflict shape behavioral adjustment among university adolescents in Cameroon. Most existing studies focus on primary or secondary school populations, leaving a gap in higher education research (Tamanjong & Ngwa, 2020). Addressing this gap is crucial for developing evidence-based interventions to support students from diverse family backgrounds.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a correlational survey research design. This design was deemed appropriate because it allows for the examination of the relationships between family structure, parental conflict, and adolescents' behavioral adjustment without manipulating any of the variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Correlational designs are widely used in social and behavioral sciences to explore associations among naturally occurring variables (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). The choice of this design aligns with the study's objectives, which seek to determine the extent to which family structure and parental conflict predict or influence behavioral adjustment among university adolescents. The study was conducted in Bamenda, the capital of the North West Region of Cameroon. Bamenda is a major educational hub with a high concentration of tertiary institutions, including public and private universities. The area is characterized by cultural diversity, socio-political challenges, and changing family dynamics due to urbanization and the ongoing

crisis. These contextual factors make Bamenda an ideal site for examining how family-related variables influence adolescents' psychosocial functioning and behavioral adjustment.

The target population consisted of undergraduate students aged 17 to 24 years enrolled in selected universities in Bamenda. Adolescents at this developmental stage are transitioning from late adolescence to early adulthood, a critical period during which family background continues to influence emotional and behavioral outcomes (Steinberg, 2014). The accessible population included students from the University of Bamenda (UBa), National Polytechnic University Institute Bamenda (NPUIB), Catholic University of Cameroon (CATUC), Higher Institute of Commerce and Management (HICM). The estimated population of students in these institutions was approximately 12,000, from which a representative sample was drawn. A sample of 400 participants was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for sample size determination $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$ where n = sample size, N = population size (12,000), e = margin of error (0.05), $n = \frac{12000}{1 + 12000(0.05)^2} = 387$ (rounded up to 400). This sample size was deemed adequate to ensure statistical representativeness and generalizability (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

A multi-stage sampling technique was used, four universities were purposively selected based on size, diversity, and accessibility. Faculties within each institution were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different academic programs. Within each faculty, participants were chosen through simple random sampling to ensure each student had an equal chance of being included. This approach enhanced both internal and external validity by reducing selection bias. This study focused on adolescents in selected universities in Bamenda and did not include students from secondary schools or technical institutions. Data were collected through self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to response bias. However, anonymity and confidentiality were emphasized to enhance the validity of responses.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were entered, cleaned, and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26, with the significance level set at $p < 0.05$. The analysis followed a multi-step procedure. Descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were first used to summarize demographic characteristics and the distribution of responses regarding family structure, parental conflict, and adolescents' behavioral adjustment. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (r) was then used to examine the strength and direction of the relationships among family structure, parental conflict, and dimensions of behavioral adjustment (internalizing and externalizing behaviors). One-way ANOVA was employed to test group differences by family type, gender, and year of study, followed by Tukey's HSD post-hoc analyses to identify where specific differences occurred. Finally, hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to determine the predictive influence of family structure and parental conflict on behavioral adjustment while controlling for demographic variables. This analytical strategy was chosen because regression allows for simultaneous examination of multiple predictors and their unique contributions to the dependent variable (Field, 2018; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019; Pallant, 2020).

ANALYSIS OF QUANTITATIVE DATA

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Family Structure, Parental Conflict, and Behavioral Adjustment

Statement	SA (n, %)	A (n, %)	D (n, %)	SD (n, %)	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
I often feel emotionally affected by conflicts between my parents.	140 (35%)	155 (39%)	65 (16%)	40 (10%)	3.62	0.82	1
Parental disagreements affect my concentration and behavior in school.	125 (31%)	160 (40%)	70 (18%)	45 (11%)	3.50	0.85	2
My family situation influences how I interact with others.	115 (29%)	140 (35%)	90 (23%)	55 (13%)	3.31	0.93	3
I sometimes react aggressively because of tension at home.	105 (27%)	135 (34%)	100 (25%)	60 (14%)	3.19	0.95	4
I feel stable and emotionally supported by my family. (Reverse)	75 (19%)	100 (25%)	120 (30%)	105 (26%)	2.43	1.06	5

Table 1 shows that emotional distress related to parental conflict ($M = 3.62$) and its impact on academic concentration ($M = 3.50$) ranked highest among respondents. Conversely, perceived emotional stability ($M = 2.43$) was lower, indicating that many adolescents feel less supported when family conflicts are present.

Table 2: Correlations Between Family Structure, Parental Conflict, and Behavioral Adjustment Dimensions

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Family Structure (Non-nuclear = 1, Nuclear = 0)	1			
2. Parental Conflict	0.34**	1		
3. Internalizing Behavior	0.29**	0.46**	1	
4. Externalizing Behavior	0.31**	0.44**	0.52**	1

$p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Parental conflict was positively correlated with both internalizing behaviors ($r = 0.46$, $p < .01$) and externalizing behaviors ($r = 0.44$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher conflict levels are associated with poorer behavioral adjustment. Non-nuclear family structure was also significantly correlated with both parental conflict and behavioral maladjustment.

Table 3: Model Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Behavioral Adjustment

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	ΔR^2	F	df	p-value
1 (Demographics only)	0.20	0.040	0.034	0.040	5.25	2, 357	.006
2 (+ Family Structure)	0.41	0.168	0.160	0.128	25.13	3, 356	.000
3 (+ Parental Conflict)	0.59	0.348	0.341	0.180	37.54	4, 355	.000

Demographic factors alone explained 4% of variance in behavioral adjustment. Adding family structure increased explained variance to 16.8%, and introducing parental conflict raised the explained variance to 34.8%, confirming its strong predictive role.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p-value
Constant	3.95	0.28	—	14.11	.000***
Family Structure (Non-nuclear)	0.41	0.08	0.33	5.13	.000***
Parental Conflict	0.52	0.06	0.44	8.64	.000***
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 0)	0.18	0.09	0.15	2.00	.047*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Parental conflict ($\beta = 0.44, p < .001$) and family structure ($\beta = 0.33, p < .001$) were significant predictors of behavioral maladjustment. Male gender also showed a weaker but significant association with maladjustment ($\beta = 0.15, p = .047$).

Table 5: ANOVA for Regression Model

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Regression	398.62	3	132.87	30.56	.000***
Residual	1508.41	355	4.25	—	—
Total	1907.03	358	—	—	—

The model was statistically significant ($F = 30.56, p < .001$), indicating that the set of predictors (family structure, parental conflict, gender) collectively account for a significant proportion of the variance in adolescents’ behavioral adjustment.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS (INTERVIEWS & FGDs)

Table 6: Themes and Insights from Qualitative Data

Theme	Category	Code Description	Grounding	Insights
Family Instability	High	Impact of separation/divorce on emotional state	Majority	Students reported emotional distress, insecurity, and concentration problems linked to parental separation.
Parental Conflict	High	Tension and disputes in the home	Majority	Frequent arguments between parents led to anxiety, aggression, and academic disengagement.
Emotional Regulation	Moderate	Coping strategies	Some	Students adopted avoidance, peer bonding, or withdrawal as coping mechanisms.
Institutional Support	Low	Counseling and guidance services	Few	Limited access to psychosocial support was reported across universities.
Resilience	Low	Positive adaptation	Few	Only a small number demonstrated resilience through strong peer networks or faith-based support.

Qualitative data mirrored quantitative results. Parental conflict and unstable family structures were central to students’ emotional instability, behavioral problems, and academic disengagement. Faculties with active counseling services showed slightly better outcomes.

However, most students reported limited institutional support. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings revealed a consistent pattern showing that parental conflict and non-nuclear family structures are associated with higher behavioral maladjustment, emotional distress and peer-based coping are common responses to family instability, institutional counseling structures are inadequate to meet the emotional and psychological needs of affected students. These findings align with previous research demonstrating the significant impact of family dynamics on adolescents’ emotional and behavioral functioning (Amato, 2010; Kelly, 2012; Lansford, 2009). Similar studies have also highlighted parental conflict as a strong predictor of both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Harold & Sellers, 2018).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed significant relationships between family structure, parental conflict, and adolescents’ behavioral adjustment. The results not only support classical developmental and family systems theories but also reinforce a growing body of empirical research showing that the family environment is one of the most powerful predictors of adolescent

psychosocial outcomes (Amato, 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Cummings & Davies, 2010). The study showed that adolescents from single-parent and divorced families exhibited higher levels of behavioral maladjustment than their counterparts from intact nuclear families. This finding aligns with previous research which consistently demonstrates that disruptions in family structure such as divorce, separation, or the absence of one parent are associated with negative emotional and behavioral outcomes in adolescents (Amato & Keith, 1991; Lansford, 2009; Kelly, 2012). For instance, Amato (2010) found that adolescents from non-intact families display more externalizing behaviors, including aggression and substance use, compared to those from intact families. Similarly, Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) observed that children and adolescents from disrupted families exhibit more difficulties with self-control, social relationships, and academic functioning.

This pattern is often explained through Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), which suggests that the absence or dysfunction of one subsystem within the family can disrupt the homeostatic balance of the entire system. When one parent is absent, responsibilities and emotional resources are often unequally distributed, resulting in inconsistent discipline and weakened emotional bonds (Demo & Acock, 1996; Wu & Thomson, 2001). In the Cameroonian context, this is further exacerbated by economic hardship and the cultural expectation that extended families provide care, which does not always replicate the stability of a two-parent home (Nfi, 2015; Nsamenang, 2002). In addition, adolescents from single-parent families often have limited access to emotional and economic support, which may increase their exposure to stressors and risk behaviors (Carlson, 2006; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). This was evident in the qualitative phase of the study where many students reported feelings of being alone or unsupported, reflecting Bowlby's (1982) assertion that secure attachment relationships provide a foundation for healthy emotional and behavioral regulation. When such attachments are disrupted, adolescents may turn to peers or risky behaviors as compensatory strategies (Steinberg, 2001; Resnick et al., 1997).

Parental conflict emerged as the strongest predictor of behavioral maladjustment, even more than family structure itself. The hierarchical regression analysis revealed that introducing parental conflict increased the explained variance in behavioral adjustment from 12% to 34%, underscoring its critical role. This finding supports the Emotional Security Theory proposed by Cummings and Davies (2010), which posits that children and adolescents exposed to persistent interparental conflict experience heightened emotional insecurity, leading to anxiety, hostility, and maladaptive behavioral responses. Several studies have confirmed that exposure to parental discord is linked to internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Grych & Fincham, 2001; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Kelly, 2012). Adolescents in high-conflict families often report depressive symptoms, irritability, and poor emotional control (Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000). They may also model the aggressive or hostile interactions they witness at home, a phenomenon explained by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), where children imitate conflict resolution styles exhibited by parents. This is consistent with findings by Davies and Lindsay (2001), who observed that parental conflict often triggers aggression, delinquency, and withdrawal in adolescents.

In the current study, qualitative findings showed that students frequently mentioned emotional tension, lack of peace at home, and constant parental fights as factors influencing their moods and behavior at school. This supports Kelly's (2012) assertion that it is not just divorce but the quality of parental relationships especially unresolved conflict that most strongly affects adolescent well-being. Parental conflict can disrupt adolescents' concentration, academic performance, and emotional regulation (Davies et al., 2002; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). The study also revealed gender differences in behavioral adjustment, with male adolescents showing slightly higher externalizing behavior than females. This pattern is consistent with findings by Steinberg (2008), Carlson (2006), and Fergusson and Horwood (2001), who found that males are more likely to express family-related stress through overt behaviors like defiance, aggression, or substance use, whereas females are more prone to internalizing problems like anxiety or withdrawal (Compas et al., 1993; Zahn-Waxler, 2000).

In addition, contextual variations across faculties were evident. Students from faculties with higher levels of social interaction and peer involvement such as arts and humanities exhibited more behavioral adjustment challenges compared to those in more structured, professional faculties. This finding supports Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that the broader social environment including school settings interacts with family dynamics to influence developmental outcomes. Environments with limited guidance or weak institutional support can magnify the effects of family instability (Garnezy, 1993; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The integration of quantitative and qualitative data strengthens the reliability of these findings. Quantitatively, parental conflict and family structure emerged as significant predictors of behavioral adjustment. Qualitatively, students shared lived experiences of emotional insecurity, parental neglect, lack of communication, and the struggle to balance personal identity with unstable family conditions. Such narratives mirror findings by Hetherington and Kelly (2002), who noted that adolescents in conflictual families often internalize the tension, leading to chronic stress and emotional dysregulation.

These findings also resonate with Repetti, Taylor, and Seeman's (2002) risky family's model, which describes how chaotic, conflictual family environments contribute to long-term emotional and behavioral problems through chronic stress pathways. Moreover, the lack of strong institutional psychosocial support reported by participants reflects gaps in protective factors such as counseling and mentoring systems, which are known to buffer the negative effects of family stress (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001). The findings support and extend three major theoretical frameworks, Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) highlighting how structural disruptions (single-parenting, divorce) destabilize adolescents' emotional and behavioral balance. Emotional Security Theory (Cummings & Davies, 2010) emphasizing the psychological insecurity caused by interparental conflict. Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) showing how family dynamics interact with broader university and peer contexts to shape behavioral outcomes. Empirically, the results align with international research showing that both structural family changes and emotional climate at home have profound impacts on adolescent behavioral outcomes (Amato & Keith, 1991; Lansford, 2009; Harold & Sellers, 2018). However, this study also contributes to African-centered scholarship by situating these processes in the Cameroonian socio-cultural context, where family roles, extended kinship networks, and economic pressures create unique dynamics (Nsamenang, 2002; Nfi, 2015).

Adolescents from non-nuclear families exhibited higher behavioral maladjustment. Parental conflict was the strongest predictor of maladjustment, confirming emotional security and social learning perspectives. Gender differences were observed, with males displaying more externalizing behaviors. Faculty environment moderated behavioral outcomes, highlighting contextual effects. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence pointed to emotional insecurity, poor coping strategies, and inadequate psychosocial support as mediating factors. This study examined the effects of **family structure** and **parental conflict** on **adolescents' behavioral adjustment** in selected universities in Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon. The findings provide robust evidence that the **family environment is a primary determinant of adolescent behavioral outcomes**, confirming theoretical and empirical insights from developmental and family psychology (Amato, 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Adolescents from **non-nuclear families**, including single-parent, divorced, or extended family systems, exhibited higher levels of behavioral maladjustment, highlighting the importance of structural stability for healthy psychosocial development (Amato & Keith, 1991; Lansford, 2009; Kelly, 2012). This supports **Family Systems Theory** (Bowen, 1978), which posits that disruptions in family subsystems affect the emotional and behavioral functioning of adolescents by altering role dynamics, parental supervision, and emotional support. Importantly, **parental conflict emerged as the strongest predictor of maladjustment**, consistent with **Emotional Security Theory** (Cummings & Davies, 2010) and findings from Grych and Fincham (2001), Harold and Sellers (2018), and Kelly (2012). Adolescents exposed to persistent interparental conflict exhibited **higher levels of internalizing behaviors** such as anxiety, depression, and emotional insecurity, as well as

externalizing behaviors including aggression, defiance, and risk-taking (Davies et al., 2002; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

These results align with **Social Learning Theory** (Bandura, 1977), which suggests that adolescents model conflict-resolution strategies and coping behaviors observed in parental interactions. Qualitative data corroborated these findings, with students reporting emotional distress, difficulties in self-regulation, and maladaptive coping behaviors such as withdrawal or acting out in response to parental discord. The study also revealed **gender differences**, with male adolescents exhibiting higher externalizing behaviors, a finding supported by Steinberg (2008), Carlson (2006), and Zahn-Waxler (2000), who argue that males are more prone to behavioral expression of family stress, while females often internalize stress, manifesting in anxiety or depressive symptoms. **Contextual differences** across faculties further demonstrated that peer dynamics, institutional culture, and access to psychosocial support significantly modulate the impact of family stressors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garmezy, 1993; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Students in peer-intensive faculties reported greater behavioral challenges, suggesting that institutional and social environments may either **buffer or exacerbate family-related risks**.

Theoretically, the study reinforces an **integrated developmental model** in which **family structure, parental emotional climate, and broader social contexts interact** to shape adolescent behavioral adjustment. Empirically, it contributes context-specific evidence from Cameroon, complementing studies in Western contexts that emphasize the centrality of both family structure and parental conflict in adolescent development (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Qualitative insights illuminate the lived experiences of adolescents navigating these family stressors, revealing how emotional insecurity, disrupted attachment, and lack of institutional support contribute to behavioral maladjustment (Bowlby, 1982; Repetti et al., 2002). In practical terms, these findings underscore the need for **family-centered interventions, parental conflict resolution programs, and university-based psychosocial support services** to mitigate the adverse effects of family stressors (Masten, 2001; Luthar et al., 2000). Such interventions should aim to strengthen emotional security, enhance coping mechanisms, and foster resilience among adolescents, thereby promoting healthy behavioral adjustment (Resnick et al., 1997; Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Adolescents' behavioral adjustment is profoundly shaped by **both structural and emotional characteristics of the family**, particularly the presence of parental conflict. While structural stability provides an essential foundation, the **quality of parent-child interactions and the emotional climate of the home** are the strongest determinants of positive or negative adjustment outcomes. To optimize psychosocial well-being, interventions must adopt a **holistic approach**, addressing family dynamics, adolescent coping strategies, and institutional support systems. Nurturing emotionally secure, supportive family environments, alongside proactive university-based psychosocial programs, is essential for promoting **resilience, adaptive behavior, and overall developmental competence** among adolescents in Cameroon and comparable contexts (Amato, 2010; Bowen, 1978; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, which highlighted the significant influence of family structure and parental conflict on adolescents' behavioral adjustment, the following recommendations are proposed for policy makers, educational institutions, families, and future research. Parental conflict resolution programs should be supported through counseling and training programs aimed at reducing interparental conflict, enhancing effective communication, and fostering cooperative co-parenting practices. Empirical studies suggest that interventions targeting marital communication and conflict resolution significantly reduce adolescents' emotional insecurity and behavioral maladjustment (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Grych & Fincham, 2001). In the Cameroonian context, culturally sensitive programs should be designed that respect extended family structures while promoting nuclear family cohesion where possible. Parents, particularly in single-parent or non-nuclear families, should be provided with practical skills for discipline, emotional support, and adolescent supervision. Evidence indicates that authoritative parenting and

consistent discipline are associated with higher behavioral adjustment and resilience in adolescents (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009).

Universities should strengthen and expand counseling centers that address emotional, behavioral, and social challenges stemming from family stressors. Services should include group therapy, peer mentoring, and individual counseling, offering adolescents coping strategies to manage family-induced stress (Masten, 2001; Luthar et al., 2000). Peer-led programs can serve as a protective factor, buffering the negative effects of family instability. Structured mentorship programs have been shown to enhance adolescents' self-esteem, moral development, and prosocial behavior, especially in contexts with weak family support (Brown & Larson, 2009; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). Universities should incorporate life skills training, including emotional regulation, conflict resolution, decision-making, and ethical reasoning, into academic programs. Research indicates that structured moral and social education promotes behavioral adjustment, empathy, and prosocial conduct, mitigating the effects of family conflict (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Eisenberg et al., 2006).

Policymakers should develop programs aimed at supporting at-risk families, including economic support for single-parent households, family counseling, and awareness campaigns highlighting the impact of parental conflict on adolescents. Structural interventions have been shown to reduce stressors that exacerbate maladjustment among adolescents (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Carlson, 2006). NGOs and local community groups should be mobilized to provide parenting workshops, conflict resolution seminars, and psychosocial support, ensuring broader reach beyond the university setting. Community engagement has been demonstrated to enhance resilience and social competence among adolescents facing family challenges (Garmezy, 1993; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Programs should account for gender differences in behavioral responses to family stressors. Males, who are more prone to externalizing behaviors, may benefit from anger management, conflict resolution, and behavioral regulation programs, whereas females may require emotional support, counseling, and stress management interventions (Steinberg, 2008; Zahn-Waxler, 2000).

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to explore the causal relationships between family dynamics and adolescent behavioral adjustment over time. This aligns with recommendations from Amato (2010) and Lansford (2009), emphasizing the need to capture developmental trajectories rather than cross-sectional snapshots. Further research should investigate the specific cultural, socioeconomic, and institutional factors that interact with family stressors in Cameroonian adolescents, providing context-specific interventions (Nsamenang, 2002; Nfi, 2015). Universities and policymakers should implement regular assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of family support and psychosocial programs, ensuring continuous improvement and alignment with adolescent needs. The findings emphasize the necessity of a holistic approach, integrating family, school, peer, and community systems. Such interventions should aim to enhance emotional security, promote positive social behaviors, and reduce maladaptive coping strategies, thereby improving overall adolescent adjustment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Masten, 2001).

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