



An Exploratory Study To Identify The Factors Leading To Anger Expression And Suppression Among Adolescents

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence is a variable that has helped humans survive in challenging situations. Inability to regulate it leads to unhealthy expression or suppression. Adolescents are generally vulnerable to emotional dysregulations. The current research adopts an exploratory approach to identify the factors and sub-dimensions leading to anger expression and suppression among adolescents. Using a pragmatic approach and purposive sampling method, 17

samples were chosen. The Anger Expression Scale by Spielberger was used to identify the levels of anger expression and suppression, and researcher developed interview schedule was used to identify the factors which were obtained by frequency analysis.

It was concluded that anger expression and suppression may be elicited by the interpersonal dimension, which includes parents, siblings, family environment and peer relationships, and academic dimension. Under the Interpersonal Dimension, the contributing factors of High Anger Expression are found to be parental and sibling modeling, frequent sibling rivalry, negative family environment, constant fights, strict and punitive parenting styles, peer modeling, peer pressure, use of offensive language, upward social comparison with another child, feeling less appreciated, and lack of safe space for expression. Academic overload, failure to meet deadlines, academic expectations and boredom are the academic factors causing anger expression. High Anger Suppression is due to neglectful, strict, and derisive parenting style, wrong modeling, trust issues and judgmental attitudes within the family and peer circles. The other causes identified are faulty anger expression training, fear of perceived reaction, academic overload, stress, and lack of platform for anger expression.

Keywords: Anger Expression, Anger Suppression, Interpersonal Dimension, Academic Dimension

Introduction

Emotions are defined as a state of feeling that involves a combination of changes within one's physiological and mental state and which have the capacity to influence one's actions and thoughts directly or indirectly. It is a state that involves a conscious awareness of the physical and psychological changes within oneself as a result of a reaction towards a stimulus. Emotional Intelligence is defined as the ability to examine or introspect, understand, and manage one's own and others' emotions. *Anger* is considered the key emotion of all the other kinds of emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, rage, etc. Mostly considered to be negative in nature because of its physiological and/or psychological consequences, this particular emotion has been depreciated for its survival value that has helped man either fight or escape threatening situations.

Spielberger defines anger as an emotional state which has the capacity to vary in intensity and the way it is expressed (Spielberger CD et al., 1983). This emotional response or state may either be suppressed, expressed, or controlled. Butcher and Spielberger defined *Anger Suppression*, also called *anger-in*, as an emotional response

involving an active avoidance of anger experience by denial of thoughts or memories related to the situation. And *Anger Expression*, also termed as *anger-out*, was defined as an emotional response involving physical acts, insults, or blame directed towards others. Based on their research, they came up with two important scales which are widely used in the field of psychology and research– the State Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI) and the Anger Expression Scale (AX), both of which have high reliability and validity.

The State-Trait Theory of Anger by Spielberger et al. states that experience of anger involves activation of both subjective feelings related to anger and a corresponding increase in physiological reactions within an individual (Spielberger CD et al., 1983). Trait anger is defined as an enduring personality pattern making individuals more susceptible to recurrent anger-related episodes. Spielberger states that individuals with high trait anger compared to individuals with low trait anger experience similar anger-eliciting factors but the anger experienced then is intensified and sustains for a longer duration.

The pros and cons of Anger Expression as observed by researchers are as follows- a group of researchers concluded that a significant positive relationship exists between anger expression and blood pressure among adolescents, thereby increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease (Starner & Peters, 2004). Another research proved that the presence of higher levels of trait anger and anger expression increased the risk of suicide attempts among teenagers (Daniel et al., 2009). In this study, the researcher also established that both anger expression and suppression led to major depression among teenage girls, increasing their risk of suicide attempts. Similar findings were observed in another study done on Korean adolescents (Park et al., 2010). Expression of anger was also found to be significantly correlated with alcohol and Marijuana use among adolescent offenders (Eftekhari et al., 2004). However, if anger is wielded constructively, it can serve as a tool to overcome hurdles and achieve desired goals (Lench et al., 2016). Another group of researchers observed that anger expression may influence leaders' effectiveness in a group but only when expressed under the right circumstances (Wang et al., 2018).

The pros and Cons of Anger Suppression as observed by researchers are as follows- Norwood and colleagues divided female adolescents into three groups: emotional eaters, restrained eaters, and healthy eaters to test them on variables like body esteem, anger suppression (self-silencing), and anger (Norwood et al., 2011). Emotional eaters are those individuals who deal or repress negative emotions like stress or anger by the act of eating or overeating, while restrained eaters deal with the same by restraining or resisting the urge to eat.

Individuals who do not let negative emotions affect their eating habits and have healthy eating schedules and nutritional levels are known as healthy eaters. As a result of the study conducted, it was observed that suppression of anger was common among emotional eaters. That is, overeating during anger experience served as a defense mechanism for suppressing anger. Higher levels of anger suppression are associated with low levels of self-esteem, problems in interpersonal relationships and sleep disturbances as suggested by a study conducted on African American male adolescents (Johnson & Greene, 1991). Another researcher aimed to understand the relationship between self-differentiation and interpersonal conflict and depression among 260 students from a university in the Midwestern United States (Choi & Murdock, 2017). Findings suggested that anger suppression was associated with depression and cutting-off of interpersonal ties. However, another study which aimed to establish a relationship between interpersonal orientation and anger suppression, it was observed that suppression of anger during interpersonal conflict was positively associated with lower levels of anger-related emotions and higher levels of perceived relational quality among individuals with self-transcendence (Han et al., 2015).

According to the current research, *Anger Expression* is defined as the behavioral reaction and the response towards others in the form of physical or verbal abuse, criticism, insult, shouting, throwing things or slamming doors as a result of anger experience. And *Anger Suppression* is defined as the cognitive and behavioral response and the reaction of anger experience towards oneself in the form of denial of thoughts or memories of anger-triggering situations, denial of anger experience, shutting or cutting oneself off from the anger-triggering situations or beings.

The relationship between anger expression or suppression and adolescents has a long history, and research suggests that most of the adolescent problems are related to anger issues. The current study aims to understand the factors that lead to these issues. Various available literature was reviewed to correlate the anger variable with the factors influencing it.

An Indian study aimed to understand the beliefs Indian adolescent male offenders hold about the causes of one's own and others' anger, concluded that one of the elicitors of anger is "perceived violations of family honor" (Raval et al., 2012)

Research aimed to establish a relationship between anger experience and expression with seven different psychosocial variables among participants aged between 14-17 years, concluded that anger was negatively

correlated with perceived family support, self-esteem and optimism, and an increase in anger was associated with negative life events, anxiety, drug use, and depressive symptoms (Puskar et al., 2008).

Arslan conducted a study to understand the relationship between perceived social support, self-esteem, trait anger, and anger expression in adolescents aged between 14-16 years and found that a negative correlation exists between anger expression and perceived social support from family and teachers (Arslan, 2009). However, the findings established that no significant relationship existed between peer support and trait anger, anger-out, anger-in, and anger-control.

Studies have also indicated the role of parents in anger-related problems in adolescents. Dickson concluded that a derisive parenting style leads to anger dysregulation and problems in peer relationships among adolescents and Muris found that parental control and rejection, inconsistent child rearing practices, and decreased levels of emotional warmth were also found to be associated with anger (Dickson et al., 2019; Muris et al., 2004). Harsh parental coping and parental distress, marital conflicts, parent's insensitiveness towards the child, and an authoritarian parenting style were found to be anger-elicitors among adolescents and children (Fabes et al., 2001; Jenkins, 2000; Snyder et al., 2003). According to another research findings, socially prescribed perfectionism was associated with an increase in anger expression and a decrease in anger suppression (Hewitt et al., 2002).

Even though existing literature talks volumes on the experience of anger among adolescents, only a handful of them study the factors causing anger expression and suppression in adolescents with relevance to the Indian context. Therefore, the present study aimed to identify the various factors under interpersonal and academic dimensions leading to anger expression and suppression among adolescents.

Method

The research aimed to identify the various factors under Interpersonal and Academic dimensions leading to anger expression and suppression among adolescents. Two research objectives were put forth (1) to identify the levels of anger expression and anger suppression among adolescents and (2) to identify the factors leading to anger expression and suppression under the dimensions of interpersonal relationships and academics. Under the Interpersonal dimension, the role of parents, siblings, family environment, and peers are considered as the sub-dimensions. A pragmatic approach was adopted and using the purposive sampling method 35 samples were initially selected. After initial analysis, samples with incomplete data were rejected. The final sample size

consisted of 17 samples aged between 10-19 years. The Anger expression scale (AX) developed by Spielberger was used to identify the participants' level of disposition towards anger expression or suppression, and the researcher developed interview schedule with both open and close-ended questions with the aim to identify the factors leading to anger expression and suppression, under the dimensions of Interpersonal and Academics, were used as assessment tools and the desired data was collected through survey method using google forms sent via WhatsApp and Instagram (Knight et al., 1988). The responses obtained were then subjected to norm and frequency analysis to draw conclusions with regard to the research objectives.

Research Findings

The current study aimed to identify the various factors under the broad dimensions of interpersonal and academics that elicit expression and suppression of anger among adolescents while keeping in mind the two research objectives which were to identify the levels of anger expression and anger suppression among adolescents and to identify the factors leading to expression and suppression of anger under the sub-dimensions of interpersonal relationships and academics.

The responses obtained were interpreted with regard to two broad dimensions namely: Interpersonal dimension, which includes parents, siblings, family environment and peers as sub dimensions, and Academics as a second broad dimension.

Table 1

Shows the anger expression and anger suppression scores and interpretation of the chosen samples on the Anger Expression Scale (AX)

Initials of Participants	Anger-Out Score	Anger-In Score	Interpretation
G.N.	24	20	High Anger expression
A.S.	13	18	High Anger suppression

M.P.	21	17	High Anger expression
A.P.	18	11	High Anger expression
R.A.P.	15	13	High Anger expression
P.	17	14	High Anger expression
H.G.	17	13	High Anger expression
P.T.	17	16	High Anger expression
P.B.	17	12	High Anger expression
A.A.	16	26	High Anger suppression
M.M.R.	16	16	High Anger expression and suppression
A.P.M.	24	18	High Anger Expression
I.V.	12	20	High Anger suppression
S.S.	15	15	High Anger expression and suppression

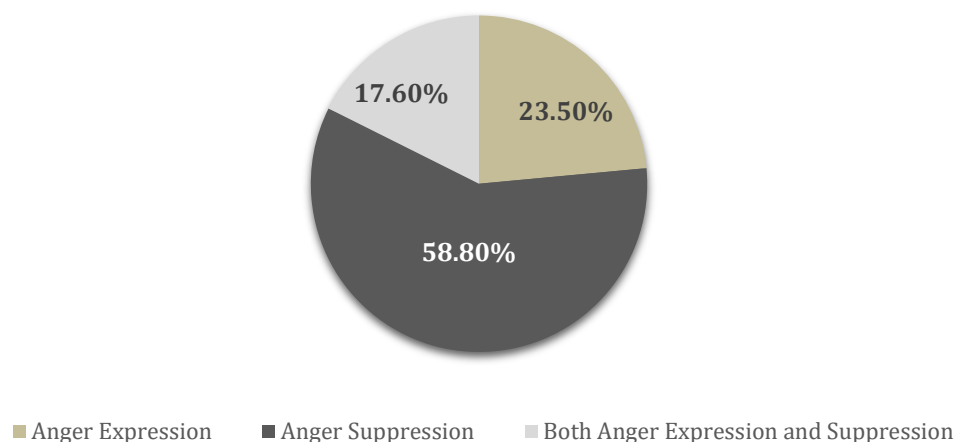
S.R.	17	16	High Anger expression
N.J.	17	17	High Anger expression and suppression
S.U.R.	17	19	High Anger suppression

The responses obtained from the chosen 17 samples on the Anger Expression Scale (AX) were tabulated on Table 1 and represented using a pie chart in Figure 1.a, according to which 23.5% scored high only on anger suppression, 58.8% scored high only on anger expression and 17.6% scored high on both anger expression and suppression.

Figure 1.a

Shows the percentage of samples in the study with high Anger Expression, Suppression, and Both Anger Expression and Suppression

Sample Percentage

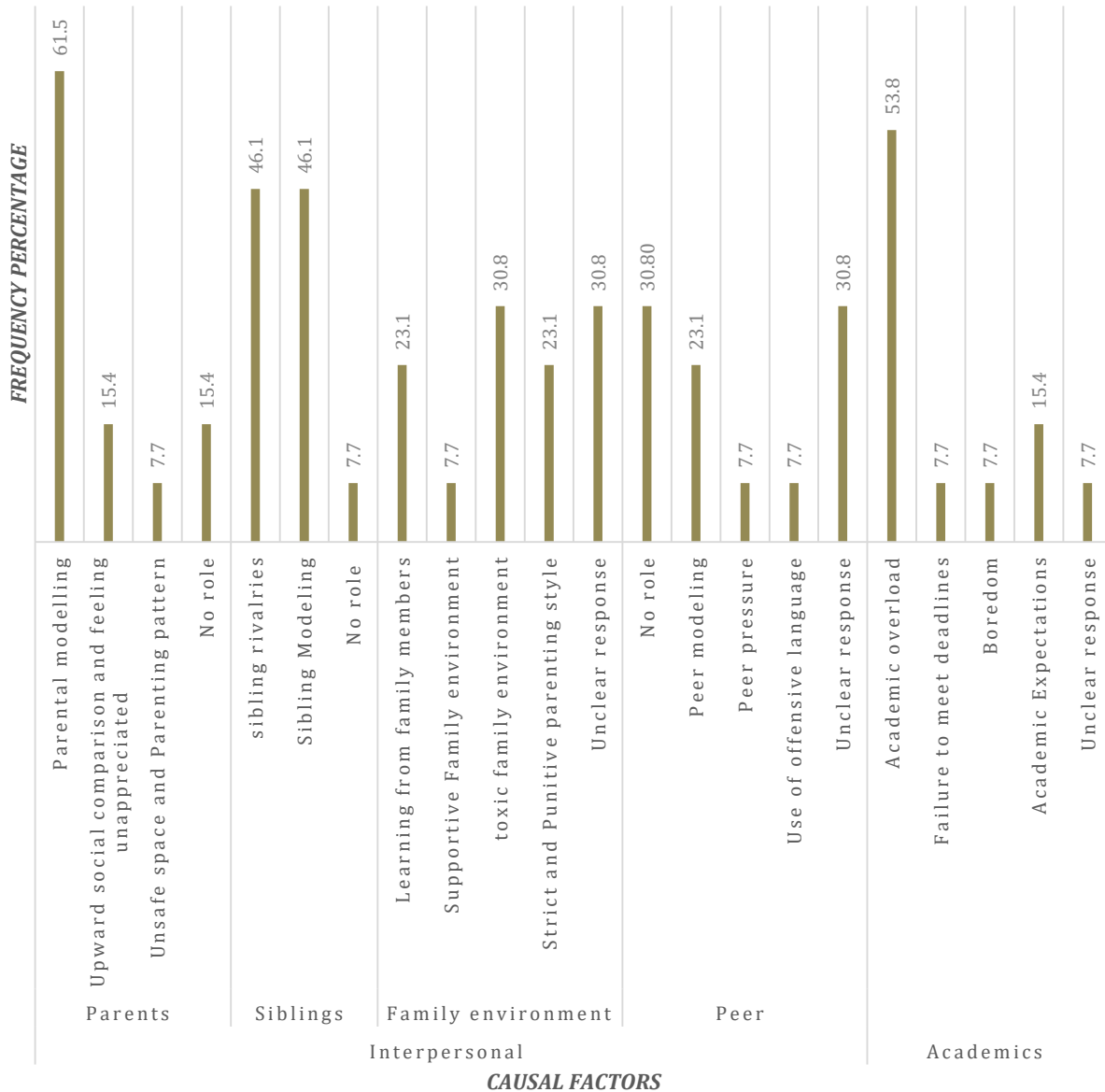


The responses from samples who scored high on Anger Expression were subjected to frequency and thematic analysis with regard to Interpersonal dimensions are pictorially represented in the form of a Bar chart (Fig 2.a).

Figure 2.a

Shows the frequency percentage of the causal factors leading to Anger Expression

Factors leading to Anger Expression



On referring to Figure 2.a, we can infer that *parental role* in anger expression is described as a sub-dimension, and the results suggest that 84.6% of the individuals who scored high on the scale of anger expression indicated that parental role could influence adolescent behaviors and anger management. 61.5% of responses indicated that anger expression is an observed and imitated behavior from parents, 15.4% claimed that children express anger when their parents make upward social comparisons with other children and are left feeling unappreciated, 7.7% indicated that adolescents tend to express anger more often in an unsafe space or in an unsafe

parenting pattern with limited platform for expression. However, 15.4% of the individuals stated that parents have no role to play in adolescents' expression of anger.

On analyzing the role of siblings, 46.1% respondents indicated that anger expression is influenced through the process of 'sibling modeling' and 46.1% indicated due to 'sibling rivalries.' However, 7.7% stated that siblings have no role to play in anger expression among adolescents.

On analyzing the role of *family environment*, 84.7% indicated that family environment has an important role to play in adolescents' anger expression. That is, through the process of learning the methods of anger expression from their family members (23.1%) and availability of a supportive family environment that provides safe space for expressing anger (7.7%). At the same time, responses have indicated that growing up in a negative or toxic family environment with unhealthy relationships and constant fights can provide space for anger expression (30.8%). Also, adolescents with strict and punitive parents and parenting styles are more susceptible to anger expression (23.1%). The responses that were unclear were excluded from further analysis (15.3%).

The role of *peer analysis* indicated that 30.8% of the individuals who scored high on anger expression, rejected the statement that peers have a role to play in adolescents' anger expressing behaviors. While 69.2% of the samples confirmed that peers have a role to play in terms of peer modeling (23.1%), peer pressure (7.7%) and use of offensive language against them (7.7%). The responses that were unclear were excluded from further analysis (30.8%).

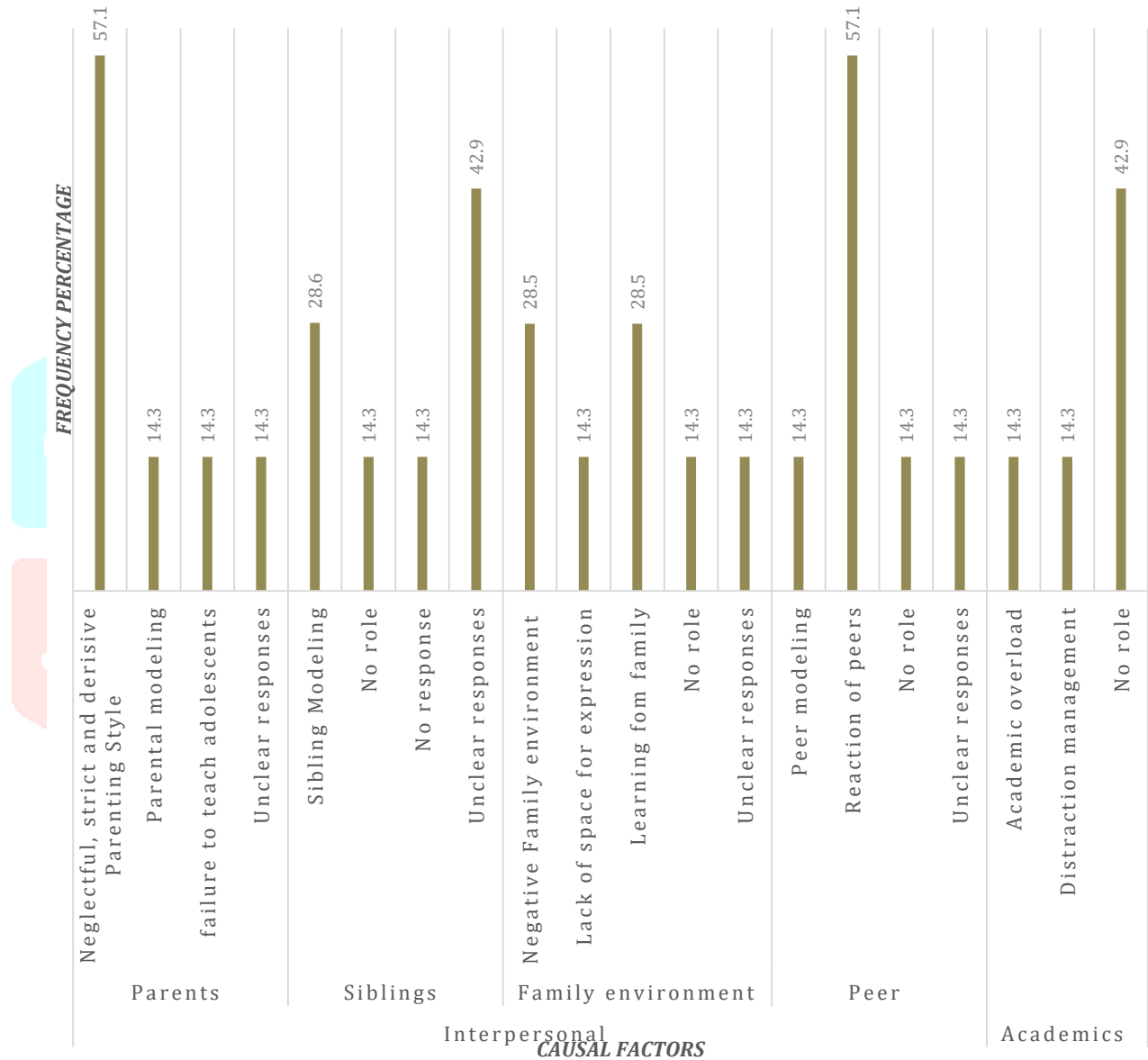
On analyzing the *Academics dimension* and its role in anger expression as depicted in the Bar chart (Fig 2.a), 53.8% asserted that 'academic overload' which led to an increase in stress acts as a major causal factor of anger expression. The other causal factors stated were failure to meet academic expectations (7.7%), failure to meet deadlines (7.7%), academic-related boredom (7.7%) and pressures from school, family, and peers (7.7%). 15.4% of responses were rejected due to unclear opinions.

The responses from samples who scored high on Anger Suppression that were subjected to frequency and thematic analysis with regard to Interpersonal dimensions, are pictorially represented in the form of Bar chart in Figure 2.b. According to this, the role of parents in anger suppression is identified as a sub-dimension and it was observed that 57.1% of the responses indicated that practice of neglectful, strict, and derisive parenting styles where the child is criticized, shamed, or mocked for expressing anger has an increased risk for developing anger

suppressing behaviors among adolescents. The other causes of anger suppression stated were ‘parental modeling’ (14.3%) and failure to teach adolescents healthy ways of expressing anger or in another words, faulty anger expression training (14.3%). The responses that were unclear were excluded from the study (14.3%).

Fig 2.b Shows the frequency percentage of the causal factors leading to Anger Suppression

Factors leading to Anger Suppression



42.9% of the responses only indicated that *sibling’s* role can influence anger suppressive behaviors but did not explain the actual causal factors eliciting it. 28.6% indicated that modeling siblings can also lead to anger suppression. However, 14.3% denied the role of siblings and the remaining 14.3% of the responses indicated no response on this sub-dimension.

On analyzing the role of *family environment*, it was concluded that 28.5% of the responses reported that a negative family environment consisting of trust issues and judgmental attitude, learning suppressive behaviors from family members (28.5%) and lack of space for anger expression (14.3%) were major reasons for suppression of anger among adolescents. However, 14.3% of the responses indicated that family environment has no role to play, while 14.3% of the responses were not directly related to the research objective and hence were not included.

The fourth sub-dimension assessed was the role of *peers* in anger suppressive behaviors and 85.7% responses indicated that peers played an important role in anger suppression among adolescents. The causal factors identified were peer influence or modeling (14.3%) and fear of perceived reaction of peers towards adolescents' anger expression leading to suppression (57.1%). However, 14.3% denied the role of peers in adolescents' tendency to suppress anger. While 14.3% of the responses were unclear and hence, not included in the study

Frequency and thematic analysis of the second broad dimension i.e., *Academics* (Fig 2.b) indicated that academic overload increases academic stress leading to a tendency to suppress anger (42.9%). 14.3% indicated that anger suppression is used as a part of academic distraction management and to increase concentration for better performance. And 42.9% of the responses denied that academics have a role to play in suppression of anger among adolescents.

To summarize, it can be said that anger suppression and expression are inter-related components of anger behaviors in an adolescent with commonalities in the factors eliciting the two which are interpersonal relationships consisting of parents, siblings, family environment and, peer relationships in terms of parental and sibling modeling, frequent sibling rivalry, negative family environment, constant fights, neglectful, strict, derisive and punitive parenting styles, peer modeling, peer pressure, use of offensive language, upward social comparison with another child, feeling less appreciated, trust issues and judgmental attitudes and lack of safe space for expression and Academics dimension which include academic overload, academic stress, failure to meet deadlines, academic expectations and boredom are the academic factors causing anger expression. Other causes identified are faulty anger expression training and fear of perceived reaction.

Applications and Limitations of the study

Adolescence, being a vulnerable period in an individual's life, is marked by difficulties in acknowledging the changes occurring within one's physical body, immediate environment, and interpersonal relationships. The findings of the current research can be used to study each of these factors leading to anger expression and suppression among adolescents in detail, to help psychologists come up with evidence-based programs on anger management for adolescents. Parents of early adolescents can be psycho-educated through effective parenting training programs to help them understand their role as parents in modeling appropriate anger-related behaviors. Future researchers may explore in detail how the environment can be modeled in such a way so as to provide a nurturing environment to the developing adolescent. A key limitation of this research was that the chosen age range failed to comprehend the interview questions and thus, the responses provided can be considered as the only factors leading to anger expression and suppression.

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