FAMILY DYSFUNCTION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WELLNESS: INSIGHTS FROM A CLUSTER ANALYSIS OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper discusses the relationship between (clusters of) family dysfunction, parental conflict and domestic violence, and various wellness dimensions among university students in Delta State, Nigeria. The survey design was a cross-sectional study used to collect data from 1,079 students via a structured questionnaire measuring family experiences and well-being outcomes. The cluster analysis identified three groups: high conflict-high violence, moderate conflict-low violence, and high conflict-low violence. Findings indicated that those students who had witnessed both high parental conflict and domestic violence had the lowest levels of emotional, social, academic and health wellbeing. However, students who were exposed to high levels of conflict but not to domestic violence showed the greatest levels of wellbeing in most of the domains. Interestingly, the lack of domestic violence in itself did not solely explain the differences in outcomes, with moderate conflict and low-violence students not always reporting higher wellbeing. These results emphasise the interrelationship between types of family dysfunction. The research highlights the importance of strategic counselling and institutional support systems in improving student wellbeing in comparable sociocultural settings.*

KEYWORDS: *family dysfunction, parental conflict, domestic violence, student wellbeing, cluster analysis, university students, Nigeria*

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INTRODUCTION

The role of family in determining individual well-being is crucial, and the precise mechanisms by which family dysfunction, especially parental conflict and domestic violence, influences various aspects of well-being are not fully understood (Badamas et al. 2023). Among young people, the instability of the family has been linked to a variety of negative effects, such as emotional distress, academic problems, and inadequate health (AVCI et al. 2021). Such concerns are particularly relevant to higher education students in Delta State, Nigeria, where a significant number face multifaceted social, academic, and health-related issues while remaining in close contact with their family settings. Although parental conflict and domestic violence are growing concerns, little empirical knowledge still exists concerning the manner in which these two variables interact to determine the well-being of students, especially in the context of higher education.

The Nigerian situation offers a very valuable environment in which to study these problems. Family structures in Nigeria have been strongly typified by high levels of interdependence, extended family participation and dependence on family support even during tertiary education. Many students are still attached to their families, both financially and emotionally, during their studies, and this may expose them to more family dynamics (Okumbiri–Omgbou 2025; Nnubia–Eze 2024). Simultaneously, conflict and domestic violence might be viewed through the lens of societal expectations and values that influence how these experiences are interpreted, communicated, and addressed at home. These specifics indicate that family dysfunction might have different implications for student well-being in Nigeria than in other countries, thus necessitating a context-specific study.

Previous studies on family dysfunction have tended to study single factors like parental conflict or domestic violence, but not the co-occurrence and interaction of these factors (Fernández-Canani et al. 2022). Previous research has always associated family instability with adverse impacts on emotional, social, and academic growth (Bo–Yating 2023; Béland et al. 2021; Frunză 2024). Most of this research, however, has been carried out in the Western context, and there is a huge gap in the knowledge of how these dynamics operate in the non-Western context of Nigeria. Moreover, research on university students, who might be particularly vulnerable due to transitional life stages and continued reliance on family structures, is lacking.

In order to fill these gaps, this paper discusses how groups classified by family dysfunction, based on the different amounts of parental conflict and domestic violence, are linked to diverse aspects of student well-being such as family,

academic, emotional, social, economic, and health outcomes. The cluster-based approach to the analysis allows the study to go beyond isolated variables and capture the synergistic impact of various types of family dysfunction. This method gives deeper insight into the relationship between particular patterns of family experiences and differences in student wellness.

The study makes several contributions; to begin with, it offers a cluster-based approach to research on family dysfunction, enabling the identification of specific patterns of parental conflict and domestic violence, as well as their various correlations with well-being outcomes. Second, it helps broaden the geographical scope of the literature on family dynamics and student wellness in Nigeria, given the lack of empirical studies on the topic. Third, it provides a detailed evaluation of various dimensions of well-being in one analytical framework, which gives a more holistic picture of students' experiences.

This research utilises data collected from 1,079 university students in Delta State, Nigeria, and classifies students according to their reported parental conflict and domestic violence experiences. It then compares the wellness outcomes of the groups. The study aims to generate insights to inform targeted interventions for at-risk students by identifying patterns in the relationships between family dysfunction and student well-being.

In general, this study improves the understanding of the connection between family dysfunction and student well-being in a particular sociocultural setting. The study offers evidence to support the development of policies, institutional support systems, and community-based intervention strategies to enhance the well-being of students in Nigeria and other settings by emphasising the importance of family dynamics in influencing the emotional, academic, and health outcomes of students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental conflict and domestic violence in families have long been identified as important predictors of negative development in children and adolescents. The dynamics continue to affect individuals into young adulthood, impacting different dimensions of well-being, such as emotional, academic, and social functioning.

Social context of the research

The relationship between family dysfunction and student well-being can be explained in the context of Nigeria. In Nigeria, family systems are commonly characterised by high levels of interdependence, extended-family engagement, and long-term support, even during higher education (Azaola 2020). A significant number of university students have close emotional and financial relationships with their families and often go home during their academic breaks, thus continuing to be exposed to family dynamics.

Parental conflict and domestic violence are important social issues in Nigeria, which have implications for psychological, social, and academic development. Some of the cultural norms that affect the experience and interpretation of conflict and violence in households include family cohesion, respect for authority and gender roles (Ekeigwe et al. 2024; Tashi et al. 2025). The expectations of caregiving roles and housework vary by gender in certain situations, which can influence the family dysfunction experienced by male and female students.

Also, the fact that higher education is accessible does not mean that students do not rely on their family backgrounds during learning, since most students still rely on their relatives. This continued relationship can predispose them to recurring exposure to family infighting or domestic violence, affecting their well-being. These contextual influences highlight the significance of studying family dysfunction in the Nigerian context.

Effects of dysfunctional families on wellness

Conflict and violence in the family have always been linked to adverse psychological and emotional impacts among youths (Chenube 2024a; 2024b). Children who experience high levels of disagreement between parents are more likely to suffer from stress, anxiety, and depression (Zhang et al. 2022). Likewise, long-term psychological effects have been associated with domestic violence, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and an inability to establish normal interpersonal relationships (Frunză 2024). These results are consistent with broader theoretical frameworks that emphasise the importance of family contexts in the development of emotion regulation and coping strategies.

Emotional wellbeing, including the capacity to cope with stress and psychological stability, is especially susceptible to exposure to family dysfunction at a young age. Research has indicated that individuals from high-conflict or violent families tend to have poor emotional regulation that may be carried into adulthood (Santoso 2019). This may be reflected in heightened emotional distress

and an inability to cope with academic and social pressures among university students. As an example, Arnull and Stewart (2021) discovered that students with high levels of family conflict reported higher levels of loneliness and psychological distress, which adversely influenced their academic engagement.

Academic outcomes are also affected by the effects of family dysfunction. According to research, conflict among parents correlates with poor academic performance because emotional distress may negatively affect focus and cognitive abilities (Shaikh–Chandio 2024). Students with unstable family backgrounds are more prone to academic problems, such as lower grade point averages and a higher risk of dropping out (Jiang et al. 2022). These results indicate that family-related stressors can disrupt the functioning of students in terms of their engagement with academic activities and duties.

Another area that is impacted by the dysfunction of the family is social well-being. Parent-to-parent conflict and domestic violence may impede the acquisition of trust, empathy, and effective interpersonal skills (Chenube 2024b; Omumu 2024). Research has revealed that individuals with a dysfunctional family background tend to develop poor relationships with others, may isolate themselves socially, and engage less in group activities (Alordiah 2022; Deng et al. 2022). In the case of university students, these problems can be manifested in the inability to create peer networks and experience collaborative academic settings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study is based on the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and the theory of attachment (Bowlby 1969), as they offer a conceptual framework to explain the effect of family dysfunction on the outcomes of wellbeing. Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner posits that the environment influences human development through interactions across various environmental systems, with the family being one of the most important microsystems. Pertinent experiences in this microsystem, including parental conflict and domestic violence, are important factors in emotional, social, and academic development. The family environment has a great impact on well-being even during young adulthood (Wang et al. 2020). The theory also argues that the relationships among various systems (family, peers, and school) may either enhance or alleviate the consequences of family dysfunction. To illustrate, positive school climates and good peer connections can mitigate the adverse effects of negative family experiences (Chilan–Cedeño 2022).

Attachment theory is an addition to this school of thought in that it explains the connection between early interactions with caregivers and emotional and relational outcomes in the long term. Bowlby (1969) claims that secure attachment is formed due to the provision of regular and supportive care, whereas insecure attachment patterns can occur due to exposure to conflict or violence. Such tendencies can be linked to difficulties with emotion regulation, interpersonal relationships, and psychological adaptation (Akintunde–Eseyin 2023; Alordiah 2019). Such issues associated with attachment can be expressed in emotional distress, social problems, and poor academic achievement in the context of higher education.

Addressing the gap in the literature

Even though the impacts of parental conflict and domestic violence on emotional and psychological development have been well established, the implications for higher education environments are under-researched. A significant proportion of the available literature has focused on children and adolescents, with little consideration of university students, who remain affected by family dynamics at a very critical transition stage.

Also, the majority of the research has been carried out in Western settings, and the gap in knowledge about the functioning of family dysfunction in non-Western settings like Nigeria is considerable. The influence of cultural norms, family institutions, and social demands on the experience and effects of family dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa may differ from that in other areas.

Moreover, previous studies have tended to investigate parental conflict and domestic violence as individual factors, as opposed to exploring the interplay of these two variables to establish different dynamics of family dysfunction. The paper attempts to fill these gaps by using a cluster-based methodology to explore the relationship between combinations of parental conflict and domestic violence and various aspects of wellness among university students in Delta State, Nigeria. Based on the foregoing, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

> *How does family dysfunction, clustered according to experiences of parental conflict and domestic violence, relate to multiple dimensions of wellness among university students in Delta State, Nigeria?*

METHODS

This study is part of a broader investigation that employed an empirical cross-sectional survey design, with data collected from a sample of university students in Delta State, Nigeria, at a single point in time. This design was appropriate for examining the relationship between wellness outcomes (emotional, academic, social, family, economic, and health) and family dysfunction (parental conflict and domestic violence) across a large sample.

Participants

The target population for this study was university students enrolled in public universities in Delta State, Nigeria. A stratified sampling approach was used to ensure that students were included from each of the five public universities in the state. In this procedure, the universities served as the strata, and students were recruited from each institution. The demographic characteristics presented below describe the final sample composition and were not used as stratification criteria.

Using power analysis, the required sample size was estimated at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. To account for incomplete responses and possible non-responses, the estimated sample size was increased to 1,100 students. Students who were under 18 years of age or who failed to complete important sections of the survey were excluded from the analysis. The final sample consisted of students with a mean age of 20.86 years (SD=2.31).

Regarding gender, 34.8% of respondents were male, and 65.2% were female. Participants were drawn from different academic levels. The largest proportion of respondents were in their fourth year or above, representing 46.3% of the sample. First-year students accounted for 15.6%, second-year students for 23.5%, and third-year students for 14.6%. Participants also came from a range of academic disciplines, including social and management sciences (29.0%), science and medical sciences (24.2%), education (19.4%), arts and humanities (18.0%), and engineering (9.5%).

In terms of family structure, most participants reported coming from nuclear families, representing 77.2% of the sample. Students from extended families accounted for 15.6%, while those from single-parent and blended families represented 5.7% and 1.5%, respectively. Regarding parental employment status, 73.3% of participants reported that both parents were employed, 21.5% reported that one parent was employed, and 5.2% reported that both parents were unemployed. Regarding housing arrangements, 54.7% of participants lived

off-campus alone, 20.7% lived with friends, 10.6% lived with family, and 14.1% lived on campus.

Measures

A self-developed structured questionnaire intended to evaluate domestic violence, parental conflict, and other aspects of wellness served as the main tool for gathering data. The questionnaire consisted of five sections covering demographic information, parental conflict, domestic violence, family wellness, and other domains of student well-being. Background information like age, gender, year of education, family structure, parental job status, and current living situation were collected in the first section. The frequency and impact of parental disputes and tensions at home were evaluated in the second section, Parental conflict, with five Likert-scale items assessing agreement with statements such as "My parents frequently argue." Students' experiences or views of domestic violence, including physical and mental abuse, were the focus of the third part, 'Domestic violence,' which included statements like "I have witnessed physical violence between my parents." Students' opinions on the relationships, stability, and emotional support in their families were gauged in the fourth section, Family wellness, using statements such as "My family provides a sense of stability." Academic, social, emotional, exam-taking, economic, and health wellness subscales were all included in the fifth section. Five items measuring academic success, stress management, social support, emotional control, financial security, and physical health were included in each subscale.

Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the instrument's reliability; results between 0.75 and 0.92 indicated good internal consistency. Content validity was established through expert review by three specialists in educational psychology, counselling, and measurement and evaluation, all with experience in scale development and student wellbeing research, while factor analysis was used to prove construct validity. The questionnaire was also pilot-tested with 50 students to make sure it was clear. Based on their responses, the necessary changes were made.

Procedure

A hardcopy questionnaire was given to university students to collect data. Before beginning the survey, participants were briefed on the study's objectives,

and their agreement was sought. The questionnaire was available for four weeks to allow students enough time to complete it. The Faculty Research Committee provided ethical approval for the study. Ensuring voluntary involvement, preserving anonymity, and shielding individuals from potential damage were all moral considerations. Participants were assured that their answers would only be utilised for research, and data were retained securely.

Data analysis procedures

SPSS (version 26) and Jamovi statistical software were used to analyse the data. Means and standard deviations were calculated as descriptive statistics to give a general picture of the demographics and wellness outcomes. Correlation analysis was used to examine the connections between wellbeing and family dysfunction, including parental conflict and domestic abuse. Furthermore, participants were grouped according to their experiences with domestic violence and parental conflict using a cluster analysis (k-means), and wellness outcomes were compared between these groups using an ANOVA. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to determine the extent of group differences, and the significance level for all statistical tests was set at $p<0.05$.

RESULTS

Cluster formation and distribution

Three separate groupings emerged based on the amounts of parental conflict and domestic violence (Table 1). Cluster 1 (36.1%) was characterised by high parental conflict and domestic violence. Cluster 2 (35.3%) included those who reported experiencing moderate parental conflict with low domestic violence, and Cluster 3 (28.6%) included subjects who had experienced high parental conflict but low domestic violence.

***Table 1**. Final cluster characteristics and distribution*

Cluster	Description	Parental conflict	Domestic violence	N	%
1	High conflict – High violence	22	22	390	36.1
2	Moderate conflict – Low violence	11	8	381	35.3
3	High conflict – Low violence	26	8	308	28.6
Total				1079	100.0

Wellness results by cluster

A visual comparison of wellness outcomes among the three groupings is shown in Figure 1, and the mean scores are reported in Table 2. There was a unique trend that was evident in all the wellness domains. Cluster 3 had the highest levels of wellness, and Cluster 1 the lowest. Cluster 2 generally lay between the two, indicating a gradient effect due to the severity and nature of familial dysfunction.

***Figure 1.** Comparison of wellness dimensions across clusters of family dysfunction among university students in Delta State, Nigeria*

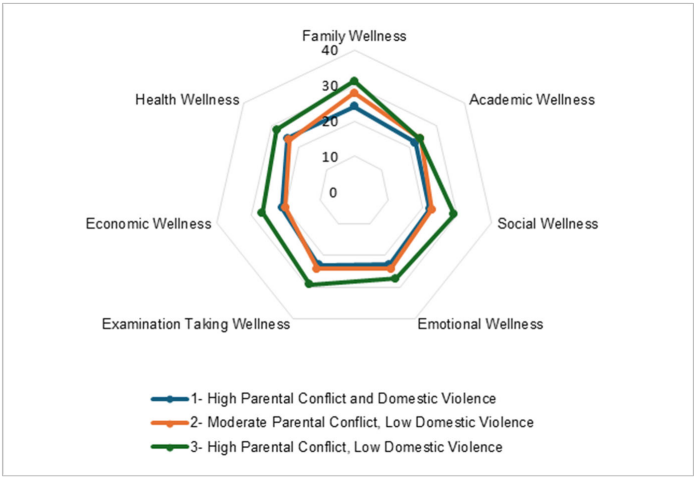


Table 2. *Mean wellness scores by cluster*

Wellness dimension	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Family wellness	24.08	27.89	31.23
Academic wellness	22.17	24.08	23.90
Social wellness	21.94	22.67	28.99
Emotional wellness	22.87	24.24	27.19
Exam-taking wellness	22.97	24.16	29.08
Economic wellness	20.86	19.88	26.74
Health wellness	24.13	23.44	28.06

Cluster 3 exhibited the strongest results for family (31.23), social (28.99), emotional (27.19), examination-taking (29.08), economic (26.74), and health wellness (28.06). On the other hand, Cluster 1 had the lowest scores on these dimensions, which can be explained by the cumulative impact of high parental conflict and domestic violence. Cluster 2 had moderate scores; however, in some aspects, such as economic and health soundness, the scores of Cluster 2 were closer to those of Cluster 1 than to those of Cluster 3.

Academic wellness showed a different trend, with Cluster 2 (24.08) slightly beating Cluster 3 (23.90), showing that low parental conflict can be linked to higher academic achievement even in the presence of a low level of domestic violence.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA)

Test of statistical significance (Table 3): A one-way ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the statistical significance of these differences. The results indicated significant differences between clusters for all wellness parameters ($p<0.001$). This confirms the fact that differences in family dysfunction are related to significant differences in the well-being outcomes of students.

Table 3. *ANOVA results for wellness across clusters*

Wellness dimension	F	p-value
Family wellness	88.22	<0.001
Academic wellness	11.49	<0.001
Social wellness	97.06	<0.001
Emotional wellness	36.03	<0.001
Exam-taking wellness	66.31	<0.001
Economic wellness	72.18	<0.001
Health wellness	45.56	<0.001

Post hoc comparisons

These differences were explained by post hoc comparisons with the Scheffe test (Table 4). Cluster 1 differed significantly from Cluster 3 across all wellness categories, with Cluster 1 showing lower ratings. Significant differences were also found between Cluster 1 and Cluster 2 in relation to many dimensions, such as familial, intellectual and emotional well-being.

A comparison between Cluster 2 and Cluster 3 revealed a more complex pattern. Cluster 3 had significantly higher scores in most areas, particularly in social, emotional, economic and health wellness, but the differences in academic wellness were non-significant. This means that although the absence of domestic violence is associated with the improvement of overall welfare, the extent of parental discord can have substantial impacts on specific areas, including school performance.

A significant trend arising from the data is that the mere absence of domestic violence does not comprehensively account for variations in wellness outcomes. Despite both Cluster 2 and Cluster 3 exhibiting comparably low rates of domestic violence, Cluster 3 consistently displayed superior levels of wellbeing across most areas. This indicates that supplementary factors, such as the form, severity, or interpretation of parental conflict, may influence student results. The findings reveal a more intricate relationship between family dysfunction and well-being than the mere direct consequence of domestic violence.

Table 4. *Post hoc comparisons (Scheffé test) of wellness across clusters*

Wellness dimension	Clusters compared	Mean difference	p-value
Family wellness	1 – 2	–3.81	<0.001
	1 – 3	–7.16	<0.001
	2 – 3	–3.35	<0.001
Academic wellness	1 – 2	–1.90	<0.001
	1 – 3	–1.72	0.001
Social wellness	1 – 3	–7.06	<0.001
	2 – 3	–6.32	<0.001
Emotional wellness	1 – 2	–1.37	0.019
	1 – 3	–4.33	<0.001
	2 – 3	–2.95	<0.001
Exam-taking wellness	1 – 3	–6.11	<0.001
	2 – 3	–4.92	<0.001
Economic wellness	1 – 3	–5.88	<0.001
	2 – 3	–6.86	<0.001
Health wellness	1 – 3	–3.94	<0.001
	2 – 3	–4.63	<0.001

DISCUSSION

This paper has explored the relationship between family dysfunction, especially parental conflict and domestic violence and various aspects of wellness among university students in Delta State, Nigeria. The results showed that there is a clear tendency: students in Cluster 1 (high parental conflict and high domestic violence) had the lowest levels of wellness in all the areas, and students in Cluster 3 (high parental conflict and low domestic violence) had the highest levels. Cluster 2 (moderate parental conflict and low domestic violence) tended to demonstrate moderate results. The results support prior evidence on adverse family environments associated with poorer psychological, social, and academic performance in young adults (Barbayannis et al. 2022; Kristensen et al. 2023).

A key trend emerging from the results is that the absence of domestic violence is not the sole cause of the difference in wellbeing outcomes. Despite the fact that Cluster 2 and Cluster 3 reported the same levels of domestic violence, Cluster 3 consistently reported higher levels of wellbeing in most domains. This implies that other elements, like the type, severity or understanding of parental conflict, can contribute to student achievement. The results thus show that there is a more complicated relationship between family dysfunction and wellbeing than a direct effect of domestic violence.

The findings can be applied to the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979), where the family is considered one of the key microsystems that affect individual development. The differences in family backgrounds, especially the presence of conflict and violence, also seem to influence emotional, social, and academic processes in students. Students exposed to worse family conditions, including those in Cluster 1, reported poorer results across all domains, which is consistent with theory that highlights the role of proximal environments. In the same vein, past studies have established that stressors and conflict within a family are strongly associated with poor wellbeing and school performance (Deng et al. 2022; Jiang et al. 2022).

The observed patterns can also be explained with the help of attachment theory (Bowlby 1969). Observing domestic violence can impair healthy attachment relationships, causing problems with emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning (Akintunde–Eseyin 2023; Alordiah 2019). This may explain the low levels of emotional and social well-being observed in Cluster 1. Conversely, the comparatively superior results in Cluster 3 indicate that without violence, there is a possibility of some students adjusting or coping with parental conflict in a manner that helps to alleviate its adverse impact. This agrees with studies that propose coping and resilience as buffers to the effects of family stress (Pascoe et al. 2019).

Of special interest is the difference between Cluster 2 and Cluster 3. Although there were low rates of domestic violence in both groups, Cluster 3 respondents indicated higher rates of wellness in the majority of domains. This implies that not every type of parental conflict has similar repercussions. The conflict experiences of those in Cluster 3 might have been less disruptive, more normalized, or occurred in situations where students had access to coping mechanisms or social support. Conversely, the moderate conflict in Cluster 2 might even have been stressful enough to influence wellbeing without the presence of protective factors. This observation aligns with research showing that contextual and moderating variables, such as support systems and personal coping styles, affect the impact of family dysfunction (Omumu 2024; Trigueros et al. 2020).

The findings make an additional contribution to the current literature, as they show that variation in wellbeing patterns can result from interactions among various types of family dysfunction. Although domestic violence always seems to be connected with worse outcomes (Hossain et al. 2022; Ragusa et al. 2023), the findings indicate that parental conflict on its own does not always have negative outcomes and can impact individuals differently depending on the context.

In practical terms, the results indicate that specific support mechanisms should be implemented with students from dysfunctional families. Universities ought to consider using counselling, stress management programs, and peer support programs that are tailored to the needs of students facing challenges related to their families. These interventions could assist students to become more resilient and develop coping mechanisms to counteract the negative impact of unfavourable family conditions.

There are a number of limitations to this research. To begin with, self-reported data may be biased, especially concerning sensitive subjects such as domestic violence. Second, the cross-sectional design is a limitation to making causal inferences about the connection between family dysfunction and wellbeing. Third, the sample size was limited to Delta State students, which can constrain the generalizability of the results to other settings.

Longitudinal studies should be incorporated into future research to understand the long-term impact of family dysfunction on well-being. Moreover, the effects of protective factors, including peer support, institutional resources, and individual coping strategies, in moderating the impact of family dysfunction, could be addressed in future research. It would also be helpful to conduct comparative studies across various cultural settings to gain insight into the effects of family dynamics on student well-being.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that there are significant effects of family dysfunction on the wellness of University students in Delta State, Nigeria. The study identified three patterns of family experience: high parental conflict, high domestic violence; moderate parental conflict and low domestic violence; high parental conflict and low domestic violence. Family, academic, social, emotional, examination-taking, economic, and health-related wellness were significant correlates of these clusters. A combination of high levels of conflict and domestic violence produced the lowest level of wellness for students, demonstrating that the impact of conflict and violence can lead to serious emotional, social, academic and health problems.

The results reveal, however, that not having a domestic violence experience does not equate to improved wellbeing. For the most part, students who experienced the highest levels of wellness also experienced the highest levels of conflict but the lowest levels of violence, indicating that the nature, context, and meaning of parental conflict may impact student coping. The study thus underscores the need to consider family dysfunction as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than as discrete phenomena. The results highlight, in general, the significance of providing counselling services at the university, peer support, building students' resilience through programs, and identifying students from distressed family backgrounds early to improve student wellness.

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