




Research Paper

Mediating Role of Callous-Unemotional Traits in the Relationship between Family Social Support and Adolescent Girls' Bullying

Azadeh Tavoli ^{1*}, Fatemeh Zandnejad ²

1. Corresponding Author: Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran 
2. Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of this study was to investigate the mediating role of callous-unemotional traits in the relationship between family social support and adolescent bullying. This research is a descriptive correlational study. The population included all female high school students in 2019-2020 academic year. The study participants included 200 female students in grades 10 to 12 who were selected by convenience sampling. They answered the Bullying Prevalence Questionnaire (BPQ; Rigby & Slee, 1995), Perceived Social Support-Family Scale (PSS-Fa; Procidano & Heller, 1983), and Inventory of Callous-Unemotional (ICU; Frick, 2004). The results showed a significant negative relationship between family social support and adolescent bullying and callous-unemotional traits. There was also a significant positive relationship between adolescent bullying and callous-unemotional traits and their subscales. The results further showed that callous-unemotional traits play a mediating role in the relationship between family social support and adolescent bullying.

Keywords: Family social support, Callous-unemotional, Bullying, Adolescents

Introduction

Bullying is a serious public health concern that affects children and adolescents. Bullying involves intentional and repetitive physical or psychological violence and constitutes an unequal power relationship in which the victim is unable to stop the bully's aggression (Postigo et al., 2013). Research shows that bullying negatively affects students' academic achievements and social adjustment (Muscari, 2002) and also has long-term consequences in adulthood, such as increased risk of depression and decreased self-esteem (Campbell et al., 2012).

Parents play an important role in the formation of child bullying. Weak family interactions are regarded as predictors of aggressive behavior (Abbasi et al., 2015). Psychological aggression in the parents is also associated with aggression in the children (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2014). Factors such as social support from the family can also play a deterrent role in bullying (Seeds et al., 2010).

Research suggests that callous-unemotional traits may play a mediating role in the relationship between family social support and bullying. Callous-unemotional traits refer to a specific emotional style consisting of lack of guilt, limitation in expressing emotions, inability to show empathy, and use of others callously for personal gain (Fanti et al., 2009). Muñoz et al. (2011) showed that callous-unemotional traits may be associated with an inability to prevent bullying. In contrast, Frick et al. (2003) showed that emotional warmth and responsiveness from the parents can lead to the development of empathy against antisocial traits.

Regarding the relationship between callous-unemotional traits and bullying (Joliffe & Farrington, 2011), on the one hand, and the effect of family performance components such as social support on callous-unemotional traits (Caton, et al, 2021), on the other hand, and also given the lack of research about bullying among girls, the aim of the present study was to investigate the mediating role of callous-unemotional traits in the relationship between family social support and bullying in adolescent girls.

Methodology

The present study is a theoretical and descriptive correlational study. The statistical population of the study included all female students in senior high school in the academic year 2019-2020, from which 200 students in the tenth to 12th grades who met the inclusion criteria were selected by convenience sampling to answer the questionnaires.

Research tools

Bullying Prevalence Questionnaire (BPQ)

The bullying prevalence questionnaire was developed by Rigby and Slee in 1995. This questionnaire consists of 20 items in three subscales. The questionnaire designers reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.69 to 0.91 for the entire questionnaire and its components (Rigby and Slee, 1995). In another study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.81 for the questionnaire as a whole and 0.81 for bullying, 0.75 victim and 0.70 social benefit, which are acceptable (Bayrami & Alaie, 2013).

Perceived Social Support-Family Scale (PSS-Fa)

The Perceived Social Support-Family Scale was developed by Procidano and Heller (1983). This is a 20-item tool that is used to measure the extent to which needs are met and family support is received. This questionnaire has an alpha coefficient of 0.90, indicating a good internal consistency. It also has an acceptable validity, and another study reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 to 0.91 for the scale (Sanaei, 2008).

Inventory of Callous-Unemotional (ICU)

The Inventory of Callous-Unemotional by Frick (2004) is used to measure callous, indifference and unemotional behaviors. This questionnaire consists of 24 items. The ICU has been validated in studies on adolescents of different countries, reporting acceptable construct validity and reliability (Kimonis, et al, 2008). Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was reported as 0.83 by Essau et al. (2006) and 0.7 by Ahmadi and Ghorbani (2021).

Results

Table 1. Correlation coefficient between adolescent bullying and callous-unemotional traits and family social support

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|----------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---|---|
| Adolescents' bullying | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Bullying | 0.76** | 1 | | | | | | | |
| Victim | 0.44** | 0.44** | 1 | | | | | | |
| Social benefit | 0.60** | 0.16* | 0.32** | 1 | | | | | |
| Callous-unemotional traits | 0.48** | 0.36** | 0.33** | 0.44** | 1 | | | | |
| Callous | 0.46** | 0.43** | 0.30** | 0.35** | 0.85** | 1 | | | |
| Neglect | 0.50** | 0.38** | 0.34** | 0.46** | 0.76** | 0.52** | 1 | | |
| Apathy | 0.46** | 0.36** | 0.34** | 0.17** | 0.60** | 0.35** | 0.20** | 1 | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---|
| Family social support | 0.32- ^{**} | 0.19- [*] | 0.21- ^{**} | 0.16- [*] | 0.25- ^{**} | 0.20- ^{**} | 0.28- ^{**} | 0.28- ^{**} | 1 |
|------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---|

^{**}P<0.001, ^{*}P<0.05

The direct relationships observed between the variables in the final model suggest that across the entire sample, all the path coefficients between the variables were statistically significant. In the research model, the relationship of family social support with callous-unemotional traits ($P<0.001$, $\beta=-0.26$) and bullying ($P<0.001$, $\beta=-0.41$) in adolescent girls was negative and significant. The relationship between callous-unemotional traits and adolescent's bullying was positive and significant ($P<0.001$, $\beta=0.49$). Therefore, all the direct paths are considered significant. There is an indirect or intermediary path in the model of the current research. Bootstrap method was used to determine the significance of this effect. The findings indicate a significant mediating role for callous-unemotional traits in the relationship between family social support and bullying ($P<0.001$, $\beta=-0.13$).

Table 2. Direct, indirect and total effects of the research variables

| Criterion Variable | Predictor Variable | Direct Effects | Indirect Effects | Total Effects |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|------------------|---------------|
| Bullying Level | Family Social Support | ** -0.41 | ** -0.13 | ** -0.54 |
| | Callous-Unemotional Traits | ** 0.49 | - | - |
| Callous-Unemotional Traits | Family Social Support | ** -0.26 | - | - |

Discussion and conclusion

The first finding of this study was the negative significant relationship between family social support and bullying in adolescent girls. This study also found a significant relationship between family social support and callous-unemotional in adolescents. Furthermore, callous-unemotional traits had a positive significant relationship with adolescent bullying. The last finding of the study was that callous-unemotional traits play a significant mediating role in the relationship between family social support and adolescent girls' bullying.

The limitations of this research include the study of only female adolescents in Tehran, the non-use of other assessment methods, and resorting to convenience sampling. Therefore, future researchers are recommended to use probability sampling and a more comprehensive sample as well as more

comprehensive assessment tools to ensure higher generalization power and greater accuracy.

The present findings expand the existing knowledge on parental support and bullying with consideration for the role of psychological concepts such as callous-unemotional traits. The results of this study can also be used for preventing and treating adolescent's bullying and for developing preventive programs targeting this age group.

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