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Testing the Structural Model of Student Bullying Based on Social-emotional Competence with the Mediating Role of Attachment Styles

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Abstract

Aim: Bullying in schools is a global challenge, with numerous detrimental side effects and broader societal implications. This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of attachment styles in the relationship between social-emotional competence and bullying. The research design was descriptive-correlational. The statistical population included all the junior high school students in Urmia city in 2020-2021. The sample included 365 students selected by cluster random sampling method. The participants completed Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ) by Zhou and Ee (2012), Illinois Bullying Behavior Scale (2001), and Adult Attachment Inventory (2011). The results of structural equation modeling indicated that Social-emotional competence has a direct effect on bullying behavior. Social-emotional competence also had an indirect effect on bullying behavior through attachment styles. Consequently, the findings showed the positive and effective role of socio-emotional competence and attachment style in reducing bullying behavior of adolescent students.

Keywords: *Bullying, Social-emotional competence, Attachment styles*

Introduction

School bullying is the most prevalent kind of youth violence that has become a significant concern for pupils and a global public health issue. Bullying has a wide range of adverse consequences, including anxiety, suicidal ideation, attempted suicide (Yu, et al., 2022), depression (Setiadi, et al., 2021), low mental well-being, sleep problems, and low academic performance (Hysing, et al., 2021) in adolescents. Recently, researchers have given special attention to the understanding and investigation of the individual mechanisms behind bullying behaviors, such as the quality of the primary attachment. Early supportive child-caregiver relationships can facilitate transformation, especially in individuals' social skills and mental health (Berlin, et al., 2005). Empirical evidence also shows that attachment styles are related to different social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes in childhood and adolescence. Studies show that children with avoidant insecure attachment styles are likelier to show antisocial and bullying characteristics (Nikiforou, et al., 2013). In addition to studying attachment styles as individual mechanisms underlying bullying behavior, another relatively new and promising approach has been forming, which focuses on the study of individual's social-emotional competencies (Zych, et al., 2018). Studies show that bullies can understand the complexity of the social situation, but are less adept at using their social-emotional competencies to positively manage the social situation. These competencies help people create and sustain social relationships (D'Urso, et al., 2022). Various research indicates that understanding and identifying the risk factors and taking action to reduce bullying in students is an inevitable necessity for protecting children from bullying and its consequences for their health and well-being (Zych, et al., 2021). Therefore, knowing the attachment styles of students and increasing teenagers' social-emotional competencies can provide them with protective resources to reduce and prevent

bullying behavior. Thus, the research question was whether the conceptual model of the research, in which attachment styles predict bullying behaviors with the mediating role of social-emotional competencies fits the collected data.

Methodology

This descriptive-correlational research was conducted to analyze the relationships between the structures of the proposed model using the structural equation modeling method. The statistical population included all the junior high school students in Urmia city in 2020-2021. The sample included 360 students selected by cluster random sampling method. The participants completed Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ) by Zhou and Ee (2012), Illinois Bullying Behavior Scale (2001), and Adult Attachment Inventory (2011).

Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire is a self-report questionnaire with 25 items scored based on a six-point Likert scale. This questionnaire has five components: self-awareness (items 1 to 4), social awareness (items 5 to 10), self-management (items 11 to 15), relationship management (items 16 to 20), and responsible decision-making (items 21 to 25). Internal consistency was reported for components of social-emotional competence as Cronbach's alpha of 0.71 to 0.76 (Zhou and Ee, 2012).

Illinois Bullying Behavior Scale was designed by Espelage and Holt in 2001 with 18 items in three components of bullying, conflict, and victimization. Its scoring is based on a five-point Likert scale. The reliability of this scale has been reported as Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, 0.79, and 0.70 respectively for the subscales of bullying, conflict, and victimization (Espelage and Holt, 2001).

Adult Attachment Inventory has 15 items that measure the three attachment styles of secure, avoidant, and ambivalent on a five-point Likert scale. In Besharat's (2011) research, the reliability of this tool was reported through Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.85, 0.84, and 0.85 respectively for secure, avoidant, and ambivalent subscales in a sample of 1480 individuals.

Results

The coefficients of the research variables indicated that all the items were representative of the latent variables. Table 1 shows the fit indices of the structural model. The results indicated the goodness of fit of the proposed model with regard to the criteria of Mears, Gamest, and Garino (2006).

Table 1: Model fit indices of the structural model

| X ² | Df | X ² /DF | GFI | AGFI | IFI | CFI | NFI | RMSEA |
|----------------|----|--------------------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| 72.76 | 28 | 2.59 | .96 | .92 | .96 | .96 | .94 | .06 |

Table 2 shows the results of the structural model analysis including direct effects, indirect effects, and the total effect of the latent variables. Bootstrapping was used to check the significance of the indirect path.

Table 2: The results of the structural model analysis: direct, indirect and total effects of research variables

| Regression paths | Direct effect | Indirect effect | Total effect | Bootstrapping(2000) | | sig |
|---|---------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------------|-------------|------|
| | | | | Confidence Interval | | |
| | | | | Lower bound | Upper bound | |
| Insecure attachment --> social-emotional competence | -.43** | | | | | |
| Insecure attachment --> bullying | .41** | .13 | .54 | .04 | .23 | .002 |
| Social-emotional competence --> bullying | -.30** | | | | | |

**P<0.01

*P<0.05

The results of structural equation modeling indicated that the insecure attachment style had a direct and significant effect on social-emotional competence and bullying. Also, social-emotional competence had a direct

effect on bullying behavior. Social-emotional competence furthermore had an indirect effect on bullying behavior through attachment styles. The significance of the indirect path was estimated and confirmed through the bootstrapping method.

Discussion and conclusion

The current research aimed to assess the structural model of bullying based on attachment styles with the mediating role of social-emotional competence. The results indicated the optimal fit of the final research model. The findings showed that attachment styles affect students' bullying behavior directly and indirectly through social-emotional competencies. Among the limitations of this research was the correlational nature of the research and self-report nature of the assessment tools, which mandate cautious generalization of the results. The results showed that although the internal working model formed in terms of insecure attachment styles alone can predict the bullying behavior of students, social-emotional competencies can play an important role in intensifying or preventing participation in bullying behavior. Accordingly, schools should develop educational workshops to increase the feeling of social-emotional competence in students, improve their psychological and emotional capabilities, and reduce externalized behaviors, including attempts to bully.

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