SELF-ESTEEM AS A MEDIATOR OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTING AND DEPRESSION

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Abstract—This research investigated how self-esteem affected the relationship between incongruent parenting style and symptoms of depression. A total of 400 emerging adults aged 18 to 25 years (M age = 20.37 years) from five universities in Malaysia completed a set of questionnaires. Analysis revealed correlations among the parental care, parental overprotection, self-esteem and depression irrespective of the congruency of maternal and paternal parenting style. Further analysis indicated that parental overprotection was strongly associated with experiencing symptoms of depression, and that this relationship effect was reduced when self-esteem was included in the model. This study indicates that self-esteem is a partial mediator of the relationship between parental overprotection and depression in emerging adults. The findings may be used in interventions designed to improve children’s emotional adjustment. The implications of the findings are discussed in depth.

Index Terms—Congruence parenting, Overprotection, Depression, Self-Esteem.

I. INTRODUCTION

Depression among emerging adults is increasing in prevalence [1] and is associated with long-term adverse effects and an economic burden [2],[3]. Depression has been linked to parenting style [4] and low self-esteem [5]. Previous research has generally considered parenting style as a single variable, combining scores from both parents [6]. This fails adequately to describe parenting in the substantial proportion of families where the mother and father have different styles [7].

In recognition of these limitations researchers have recently turned to the concept of 'co-parenting' which considers the triadic relationship between father, mother and child [8]. In co-parenting research the emphasis is on parental alliances; parents who share similar goals are described as being congruent parents [4]. Congruent parents employ the same parenting style and are consistent in their articulation of goals and expectations to their children. Earlier research has shown that congruence in parenting style is positively associated with emotional adjustment in children [4], [7]. Incongruent parents use different parenting styles [4]. Reference [9] found that inconsistency between parents was linked to the incidence of symptoms of psychological disorder and argued that because inconsistent parenting placed the child in a ‘double bind’, trapped between two different sets of expectations and rules, it had a negative impact on adjustment.

It has also been suggested that low self-esteem is a risk factor for, and a product of depression [5]. The vulnerability hypothesis posits that low self-esteem is a risk factor for depression whilst the scar hypothesis posits that low self-esteem is an outcome of depression [5] and although there is evidence to support both hypotheses, there is stronger support for the vulnerability hypothesis. In a five-year longitudinal study [10] found that self-esteem predicted depression. Similarly, in a 23-year longitudinal study [11] also found that low and decreasing levels of global and domain-specific self-esteem predicted depression. This evidence suggests that self-esteem is more likely to be an antecedent of depression than a product of it.

Reference [12] found a negative association between parental authority and self-esteem and concluded that this was because growing up in a demanding environment interfered with development of children’s ability to make independent decision and encouraged an unhealthy reliance on parents. Similarly, [13] found that inconsistent parenting was linked to low self-esteem and depression and affected children’s perceptions of themselves and how sure they were of their self-perceptions. Reference [14] experiencing a relative lack of parental care might affect a child’s view of the world or of him or herself and thus lead to development of a negative world view and depressive status. Several studies have reported that low self-esteem is involved in the relationship between parenting and depression [15]. Reference [16] provided strong evidence that self-esteem reduces depression by ruling out stability of self-esteem as a confounding variable.

This study considered parenting style, self-esteem and depression together. We hypothesised that self-esteem plays a role in the relationship between incongruent parenting and depression. Our aim was to investigate whether depression was associated with incongruent parenting and whether self-esteem influenced the putative relationship between incongruent parenting and depression in emerging adult. We posited that parents with incongruent parenting styles send inconsistent messages to their children and thus jeopardise their ability to internalise parental standards and develop high self-esteem and that this would increase the risk of such children developing...
depression during emerging adulthood [4], [7], [9].

II. METHODS

A. Participants
There were 400 participants (200 men; 200 women) aged between 18 to 25 years old (M age = 20.37 years, SD = 1.82). Inclusion criteria were that both biological parents must be alive and acting as caregivers to the participant and that the participant must have lived with both parents for at least 10 years.

B. Measurement
Parenting style was measured using the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI)[16]. The PBI consists of two subscales, one consisting of 12 items pertaining to care and the other of 13 items pertaining to overprotection. All items are scored by the respondent from 0 (very unlikely) to 3 (very likely) and total scores for the subscales are the sums of score on the relevant items. Higher scores indicate greater care or greater control. The instrument has good concurrent validity and reliability [17]. In this study values of Cronbach’s alpha for the various subscales were good: α = .79 (paternal overprotection), α = .88 (paternal care), α = .77 (maternal overprotection) and α = .84 (maternal care).

Depression was measured using the Costello-Comrey Depression and Anxiety Scales (CCDAS)[18]. The CCDAS consist of 14 items; responses are given on nine-point Likert scales anchored by ‘absolutely not’ and ‘absolutely’ or ‘never’ and ‘always’. The total scores are the sum of scores on all the items. The CCDAS has shown high internal consistency (.90) and good concurrent validity [17]. In this study reliability was high (Cronbach’s α = .90).

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale developed by [19]. This scale consist of 10 items and is scored using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly disagree). Total score is the sum of score on individual items and higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. The instrument has shown good internal consistency (Cronbach’s α = .74) and good concurrent validity [17]; in this study Cronbach’s α = .85.

C. Design and Procedure
Volunteer participants were recruited after ethical approval had been obtained. Participants were given brief information about the study and asked to complete a set of questionnaires.

III. RESULTS
This study examined the relationship between incongruent parenting on depression and whether self-esteem plays any role in this relationship. Over half the 400 participants (221, 55.3%) reported experiencing congruent and 179 (44.7%) reported experiencing incongruent parenting. The means, standard deviations and pairwise correlations for all variables of paternal and maternal care and overprotection, self-esteem, and depression are shown in Table 1. An independent samples t-test indicated that there was no difference in the depression scores of those who reported experiencing congruent parenting (M = 49.86, SD = 18.95) and those who reported experiencing incongruent parenting (M = 51.25, SD = 17.88; t(398) = -0.75, p = .46) and the difference between means was small (Cohen’s d = -.08).

Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to assess relationships between parenting style, self-esteem and depression. The results are given in Table 1; there were significant negative correlations between depression and both paternal care (r(118) = -.31, p < .001) and maternal care (r(398) = -.43, p < .001). Depression was, however, positively correlated with both paternal overprotection (r(398) = .18, p < .001) and maternal overprotection (r(398) = .25, p < .001). There were also positive correlations between self-esteem and maternal care (r(398) = .33, p < .001) and self-esteem and paternal care (r(398) = .18, p < .001). Self-esteem was negatively correlated with paternal overprotection (r(398) = -.13, p = .01), maternal overprotection (r(398) = -.28, p < .001) and depression (r(398) = -.56, p < .001).

Hierarchical multiple regression was performed to examine the effect of parental overprotection on depression whilst controlling for the effects of self-esteem. Only paternal overprotection was considered as few previous studies have investigated the effects of paternal parenting style [6]. Preliminary analyses showed that the data did not violate assumptions of normality, linearity, multicolinearity, and homoscedasticity. Self-esteem was entered in Step 1, and explained 34% of the variance in depression. After entry of paternal overprotection at Step 2, the model explained 35% of variance in depression, F (1,397) = 108.74, p < .000. The control measure explained an additional 1% of variance in depression. After controlling for self-esteem, R squared change = .01, F change (1, 397) = 7.30, p = .01. These results indicated that self-esteem was a partial mediator of the relationship between paternal overprotection and depression (see Table 2).

Table1. Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations between Parenting Style, Self-Esteem and Depression (N=400)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mother care</td>
<td>23.06</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Father care</td>
<td>22.63</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mother overprotection</td>
<td>15.80</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Father overprotection</td>
<td>15.80</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Depression</td>
<td>50.48</td>
<td>18.67</td>
<td>-.43**</td>
<td>-.51**</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Self-esteem</td>
<td>27.62</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.05, **p<.001
Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary for Paternal Overprotection and Self-Esteem Predicting Depression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step and Predictor Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>R²</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
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<td>1.83</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal Overprotection</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: N=400, p < .05

IV. DISCUSSION

This study investigated whether incidence of symptoms of depression was influenced by experience of incongruent parenting style and whether young people’s self-esteem mediated any such relationship. There was no evidence that congruency of parenting influenced the incidence of depression in emerging adults; however both parenting style and self-esteem were linked to depression. The effect of paternal overprotection on depression was reduced after controlling for self-esteem, indicating that self-esteem mediated the relationship between paternal overprotection and depression.

These findings conflict with studies which found a relationship between parenting congruency and depression [4], [9]. One explanation for our failure to detect an association is that by the time they reach emerging adulthood children have adapted to the differences between their parents’ parenting styles and learned how to deal with them [20].

Like previous studies [21], [22], [23] we found correlations among all the variables. Parental care was negatively correlated with depression whereas parental overprotection was positively correlated with depression. These results suggest that the support and acceptance associated with parental warmth and care buffer children against depression [24]. Overprotective parents, however, place great demands on their children; these demands decrease their ability to make decisions and self-evaluate and thus increase their sense of worthlessness and insecurity [22]. Similarly, [6] posited that overprotective parenting resulted in a hierarchical parent-child relationship which deprived the child of opportunities to make decisions and adversely affected their self-esteem because it led to feeling disadvantaged in decision-making situations.

The hierarchical multiple regression analyses confirmed that self-esteem partially mediated the effect of paternal overprotection on depression. The results were in line with the other studies [6], [15], [22] and revealed that the effect of paternal overprotection on depression was smaller after controlling for variance in self-esteem. It has been suggested that paternal overprotection usually takes the form of strongly controlling behaviour and often results in serious tension and frustration between father and child [22] (Irfan, 2011) and that in consequence paternal overprotection leads to feelings of hopelessness, anxiety and self-criticism in children that predispose them to depression as emerging adults [25].

This study provided some information about relationships among parenting style, self-esteem and depression in emerging adults in Malaysia and may be used to inform development of mental health interventions to reduce the risk of depression in emerging adults. We also found that a large proportion of emerging adults experienced incongruent parenting; this result could be explored in further research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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REFERENCES


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