

Research Paper

Childhood Emotional Abuse and Borderline Personality Disorder Features: The Mediating Roles of Attachment Style and Emotion Regulation



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ABSTRACT

Objectives This study aimed to evaluate the mediating role of attachment styles and emotional regulation in the relationship of childhood emotional abuse and borderline personality disorder features.

Methods In a descriptive-correlational study, a sample of 312 students of Shahid Beheshti University was selected using cluster sampling method. Participants responded to the Child Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), Borderline Personality Inventory (BPI), Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), and Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS). Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) of Path Analysis type.

Results Evaluation of the hypothesized model showed that this model has suitable fitness indices. Results showed that anxious attachment style and difficulties in emotion regulation can predict borderline personality disorder feature in full mediation.

Conclusion The result, supporting theoretical model for borderline personality disorder, proposes a suitable framework for etiology of the disorder.

Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a grave disorder accounting for 20% to 40% of psychiatric inpatient admissions [1]. It is estimated that 84% of patients with BPD show suicidal behaviors and 8% of them die by suicide [2]. BPD is a problematic situation in clinical populations, and the general population, because BPD features manifest a continuum. Adult BPD features in the general population result in significant adverse complications like

academic failure, meeting lifetime criteria for a mood disorder, relationship problems, and alcohol use [3].

Several studies have confirmed the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and BPD in adulthood [4]. For example, Bierer et al. [40] found that childhood emotional abuse and not physical or sexual abuse, or any form of neglect was predicted by a BPD diagnosis. However, although many studies have confirmed the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and BPD, this does not mean that all victims of emotional abuse are affected by this disorder [6]. Thus, it is important to delineate the specific mechanisms accounting for this relationship. In this regard, a hand-

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ful of studies have identified two major links between childhood abuse and BPD pathology. One link is attachment style and insecurity in attachment [7] and the other is difficulties with emotion regulation [8].

Several empirical researches have shown the theoretical relationship between attachment insecurity and BPD [7]. However, there is no research agreement about which attachment styles are involved in this relationship [7]. The other link between child abuse and BPD is difficulties in emotion regulation. Studies suggest that children with a history of childhood emotional abuse are more likely to have difficulties with emotion regulation [3]. Similarly, individuals with BPD diagnosis report having general difficulties with emotion regulation [41].

Thus, this study aims to investigate the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and BPD features. In this regard, researchers intend to examine the role of attachment styles and emotion regulation. In other words, the role of attachment styles and emotion regulation in the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and BPD features has been studied.

2. Method

Study participants

A total of 312 students were selected from the Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran. The sample included 128 (41.02%) male and 184 (58.98%) female, with age ranging from 18 to 31 years ($M=22.9$, $SD=3.1$). All participants gave their informed consent for this study.

Study measures

Child Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ)

CTQ is a 45-item retrospective self-report questionnaire that assesses subjectively participant's general childhood environment [10]. It covers five domains of childhood trauma, i.e., sexual abuse, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, physical abuse, and physical neglect. This study only employed the emotional abuse and emotional neglect subscales. The Persian version of CTQ showed a high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.65-0.91$) and acceptable test-retest reliability [11].

Borderline Personality Inventory (BDI)

BDI is a 53-item self-report inventory, which is widely used for assessing borderline personality traits in clinical and non-clinical samples. Persian version of BDI showed acceptable test-retest reliability ($r=0.80$) and acceptable subscales reliability [12].

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)

DERS is a self-report questionnaire that assesses both individual's overall difficulties in emotion regulation and their difficulties across six domains of emotion regulation. Persian version of this scale has a high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.86$) [13].

Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS)

RAAS is an 18-item self-report questionnaire which assesses three attachment styles: secure attachment, insecure anxious attachment, and insecure avoidant attachment. Cronbach's α of the Persian version for each of the three subscales

Table 1. Matrix of correlation between all variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Childhood emotional abuse	1					
2. Secure attachment style	0.005	1				
3. Insecure avoidant attachment	0.33**	0.047	1			
4. Insecure anxious attachment	0.41**	0.038	0.023**	1		
5. Difficulties in emotion regulation	0.036**	0.022	0.011*	0.031**	1	
6. BPD features	0.010	0.034	0.06	0.38**	0.43**	1

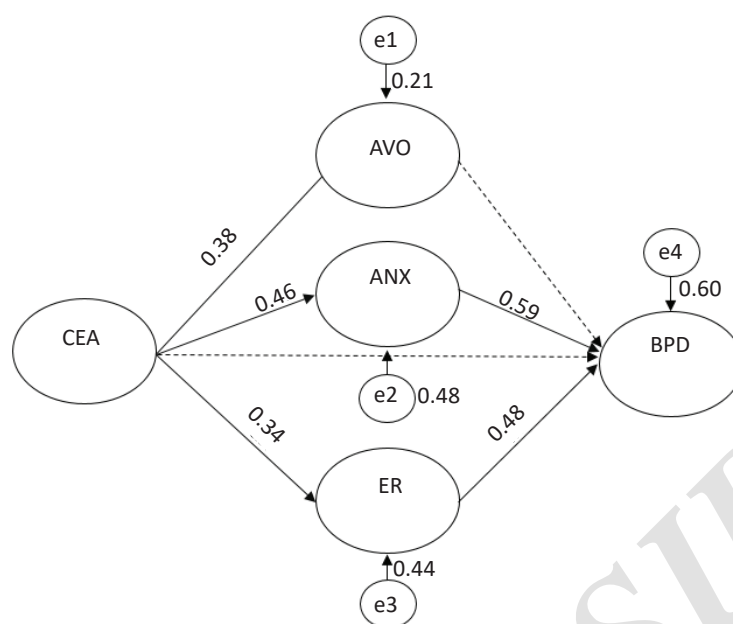
* $P<0.01$; ** $P<0.05$

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Table 2. Measures of goodness of fit of structural equation modeling

Index	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	RFI
Value	1.678	0.056	0.929	0.884	0.929	0.970	0.956

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Figure 1. Measurement model of variables

Insignificant paths are in dashed lines; CEA: Childhood Emotional Abuse; AVO: Avoidant Attachment Style; ANX: Anxious Attachment Style; ER: Emotion Regulation; BPD: Borderline Personality Disorder Features

are 0.81, 0.85 and 0.81, respectively, which are high. Also test-retest coefficient of this scale is acceptable ($r=0.89$) [14].

Data analysis

The present study is a correlational study and its data were processed by Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or causal modeling using path analysis.

3. Results

Table 1 demonstrates matrix of correlations between variables of the study. According to Table 1, as the direct path of emotional abuse and BPD was not significantly correlated, hence this path was removed in the final model and the measurement model was again evaluated. Fit indices (Table 2) demonstrated a good fit suggesting that this model of measurement offers an acceptable representation of the model. The final model (Figure 1) demonstrates no direct path between childhood emotional abuse and BPD; however, this relationship is confirmed through a non-direct path. In other words, both attachment styles and also difficulties in emotion regulation have fully-mediated the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and BPD.

4. Discussion

The current study aims to investigate the SEM analysis of the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and BPD with mediating roles of attachment styles as well as difficulties in emotion regulation in Iranian student samples.

Findings of the current study show that attachment styles and difficulties in emotion regulation can fully mediate the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and BPD, which are consistent with the findings of Kuo et al. [3], Neumann [15] and Critchfield et al. [16]. Furthermore, our model was statistically confirmed and is also consistent with Kuo et al. [42]. The only exception is that Kuo model suggests that difficulties in emotion regulation can partially mediate the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and BPD, but our model suggests complete mediation between these variables. According to our model, insecure anxious attachment can solely predict BPD along with experiencing emotional abuse in childhood. Also, difficulties in emotion regulation can predict BPD.

The child after being continually exposed to emotional abuse goes through developmental trajectories and pathways which make the child prone to BPD [18]. Two developmentally important pathways are attachment-based relationships and the development of emotion regulations. Current research shows that participants who had difficulties in this domains were more likely to have BPD features.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

First, the general explanations of the research objectives were given to the participants and after receiving informed consent from them, test questions were distributed among them.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declared no conflict of interest.

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