

The Effect of Parental Conflict on Loneliness in Middle School Students: the Mediating Role of Self-Esteem

Qing Wei^{1,a}, Haoyue Gao^{2,b}

¹*School of Continuing Education, Chengdu University, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 610106, China*

²*School of Teacher Education, Chengdu University, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 610106, China*

^a459414656@qq.com, ^b3175119285@qq.com

Keywords: Loneliness; Parental Conflict; Self-Esteem; Middle School Students

Abstract: Loneliness is a subjective emotional experience of being alone, isolated, lost, alienated and unhappy that occurs when an individual is dissatisfied with their social relationship network. It is a negative and pervasive psychological state. This study employed the Perceived Parental Conflict Scale, the Self-esteem Scale, and the Loneliness Scale to investigate the relationship among parental conflict, self-esteem, and loneliness among 370 students from the first to the third year of junior high school. It was found that parental conflict was significantly positively correlated with loneliness, significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem, and self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated with loneliness. Moreover, self-esteem played a partial mediating role between parental conflict and loneliness. The research results provide empirical references for mental health educators to improve the negative mood of teenagers and enhance their mental health level.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development and transformation of society, people are facing more and more pressure and challenges. As a special group, teenagers are under pressure from various aspects such as studies, family and social interaction. If they cannot handle interpersonal relationships with family members and peers properly, they are prone to negative moods such as increased worries, depression and loneliness. Loneliness is a subjective emotional experience of solitude, isolation, loss, alienation and unhappiness that occurs when an individual is dissatisfied with their social relationship network. It is a negative and pervasive psychological state [1]. As a negative state of mind, the negative impact of loneliness on physical and mental health can be compared with the recognized risk factors for illness, such as lack of physical activity, smoking and obesity. Loneliness not only has a significant impact on physical health and mortality [2], but can also predict and exacerbate a series of mental health problems: social anxiety, depression, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts and behaviors [3].

The spillover hypothesis holds that the impact of each relationship within a family does not merely exist between the two parties; their behaviors and emotions can also affect others in the same system. Marital relationship, as an important component of the family system, parental conflicts not only affect the marital relationship of the couple but also the parent-child relationship

[4].Conflicts between parents can damage the parent-child relationship, reduce warm responses to children, and thus make children feel lonely [5].According to the theory of depressive self-esteem, parental conflict, as a kind of stress, is prone to cause children to have lower self-esteem [6].Studies have found that there is a significant correlation between the marital conflicts perceived by children and various adaptation problems, such as low self-esteem, aggressive behavior, emotional adaptation, and academic difficulties.Teenagers with a certain ability of self-evaluation may be more susceptible to the influence of a higher level of conflict between their parents, have more negative attitudes towards themselves, and thus show a lower level of self-esteem [7].

Self-esteem is a core component of the self-system.The lower the level of self-esteem, the stronger the sense of loneliness[8].Research has found that the more attention and care children receive from their parents, the more conducive it is for them to form a positive self-evaluation, thereby promoting the establishment of a high level of self-esteem and ultimately increasing the level of children's sense of loneliness.Children with high self-esteem give themselves full affirmation in daily life, show positive behavioral patterns, and thus feel less lonely [9].According to social interpersonal theory, individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to have negative self-evaluations. They lack confidence in interpersonal communication, experience higher social anxiety, and thus are reluctant to reveal themselves, developing a psychological tendency to escape reality, which eventually leads to the occurrence of social loneliness [7].The cognitive theory of depression emphasizes that negative events destroy an individual's stable and positive belief system, activate the individual's negative cognition and attitude towards themselves, increase the individual's denial of self-worth, and reduce the individual's self-esteem. Individuals with low self-esteem tend to view life events from a negative perspective and generate more negative emotions [6].Parental conflicts, as negative events, may affect an individual's negative emotions such as loneliness by reducing their self-esteem. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that self-esteem plays a mediating role between parental conflict and loneliness.

2. Research methods and objects

2.1 Research object

Students aged 12 to 16 from grades 7 to 9 of a certain middle school in Zhoukou City were randomly selected as the subjects. A total of 370 questionnaires were distributed, 356 questionnaires were retrieved, 14 invalid questionnaires were excluded, and finally 356 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective recovery rate of 94.8%.All the subjects have obtained the informed consent of their guardians, and the research process has been approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Normal College of Chengdu University.

2.2 Research tools

2.2.1 Perceived Parental Conflict Scale

The Perception Scale of Marital Conflict (CPIC) for children consists of seven dimensions, namely the intensity, frequency, content, solution, self-attribution, threat perception and coping efficacy of parental conflict [10].In this study, the conflict characteristic subscale revised by Chi Liping and Xin Ziqiang was adopted to measure the perceived level of parental conflict among junior high school students from three dimensions: conflict frequency, intensity and resolution. A five-point scoring method was used, with a total of 17 items. The higher the score, the higher the perceived degree of parental conflict. The Cronbach's α coefficient of this subscale is 0.90.

2.2.2 Self-esteem scale

The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale in this study refers to the "Handbook of Mental Health Assessment Scales (Revised Edition)" compiled by Wang Xiangdong et al., which is used to assess adolescents' evaluation of self-worth and the resulting subjective experiences [11]. This scale consists of 10 items and is scored at four points. The higher the score, the higher the degree of self-esteem. The Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale in this study was 0.84.

2.2.3 Loneliness Scale

The third edition of the "UCLA Loneliness Scale" is used to evaluate the loneliness of various groups caused by the gap between social expectations and actual levels, and is applicable to the student population [12]. This scale consists of 20 questions and adopts a four-level scoring system from 1 to 4 points, with exactly one dimension. The total score is within the range of 20 to 80. The higher the score, the higher the level of loneliness. The α coefficient of the scale in this study is 0.83.

2.3 Data processing

In this study, SPSS27.0 was used to conduct statistics and analysis on the data obtained from the questionnaire, such as descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis, etc., and Process was used for the mediating effect test.

3. Findings

3.1 Common method bias test

The study adopted the Harman single-factor test method to conduct the common method deviation test on the original items of the three questionnaires. The variance interpretation percentage of the first common factor extracted from the "Perceived Parental Conflict Scale", "Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale", and "UCLA Loneliness Scale" was 39.0%, indicating that the sample data was less affected by the common method bias and could be further analyzed.

3.2 The current situation of parental conflicts, self-esteem and loneliness among junior high school students

The descriptive statistical results of parental conflict, self-esteem and loneliness among junior high school students are as follows: The average level of parental conflict among junior high school students is within the range of 17-51 divisions ($M = 36.53$), and the perceived level of parental conflict by junior high school students in this school is not high and the degree of dispersion is relatively high ($SD = 10.02$), that is, there are significant differences among individuals. In terms of self-esteem level, the subjects were at a medium level ranging from 26 to 32 points ($M = 28.23$), and there is still room for improvement in the self-esteem level of junior high school students in this school. The average level of loneliness of the subjects was close to 44 points ($M = 43.69$), and the degree of dispersion was relatively high ($SD = 12.24$), indicating that the level of loneliness of these junior high school students was relatively high, and there were significant differences among individuals.

3.3 The correlation among parental conflicts, loneliness and self-esteem among junior high school students

The correlation analysis among parental conflict, loneliness and self-esteem of junior high school students was conducted using SPSS27.0. The specific results are shown in Table 1: The correlation coefficient between loneliness and parental conflict is 0.931. This indicates that parental conflicts among junior high school students are positively correlated with feelings of loneliness. When parental conflicts increase, feelings of loneliness tend to increase as well. Parental conflict was significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem ($r = -0.881^{**}$), that is to say, the higher the level of parental conflict perceived by junior high school students, the lower their self-esteem level. Self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated with loneliness ($r = -0.867^{**}$), indicating that the lower the self-esteem level of junior high school students, the stronger their sense of loneliness.

Table 1 Correlation among parental conflicts, self-esteem and loneliness among junior high school students

	Parental conflict	self-respect	loneliness	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Parental conflict				36.53	10.02
self-respect	-0.881^{**}	-		28.23	6.18
loneliness	0.931^{**}	-0.867^{**}	-	43.69	12.24

3.4 Test of the mediating effect of self-esteem

In this study, Model4 in the Process macro program compiled by Hayes was used to test the mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between parental conflict and loneliness. The data are shown in Table 2:

Table 2 Regression Analysis of the mediating Effect of Self-esteem

implicit variable	predictor variable	R2	Adjusted R2	<i>F</i>	β	<i>t</i>
loneliness	Parental conflict	0.868	0.868	2331.86	0.932	48.28***
self-respect	Parental conflict	0.777	0.776	1231.94	-0.881	-35.09***
loneliness	Parental conflict	0.878	0.877	1266.49	0.750	19.03***
	self-respect				-0.206	-5.23***

The three variables were analyzed according to the mediating effect test procedure proposed by Wen Zhonglin et al. Firstly, regression predictive analysis was conducted with parental conflict as the predictor variable and loneliness as the dependent variable. It was found that parental conflict had a significant positive predictive effect on loneliness ($B = 0.932$, $P < 0.001$), and its explanatory value is 86%. Secondly, a regression predictive analysis was conducted with parental conflict as the predictor variable and self-esteem as the dependent variable. The results revealed that parental conflict had a significant negative predictive effect on self-esteem ($B = -0.881$, $P < 0.001$), and its explanatory value is 77%; Thirdly, regression predictive analysis was conducted with self-esteem and parental conflict as predictive variables and loneliness as the dependent variable. The results revealed that parental conflict had a significant positive predictive effect on loneliness ($B = 0.750$, $P < 0.001$), self-esteem has a significant negative predictive effect on loneliness ($B = -0.206$, $P < 0.001$), the explanatory value of parental conflict and self-esteem for loneliness was 87%.

3.5 The mediating role of self-esteem between parental conflicts and loneliness among junior high school students

According to the steps of the mediating effect test, the mediating role of self-esteem is analyzed. Using the SPSS program Process compiled by Hayes(2013), 5000 times of repeated

sampling were conducted using the bideviation-corrected non-parametric percentile Bootstrap method to calculate the average path coefficient of the mediating effect and the 95% confidence interval (CI) of the mediating effect. If the 95%CI of the path coefficient does not include 0, it indicates that the effect size is significant. As shown in Table 3, the 95% confidence interval (CI) of the indirect effect path does not include 0. The mediating effect is significant, accounting for 19.5% of the total effect. This indicates that parental conflict not only directly affects loneliness but can also indirectly influence loneliness through self-esteem.

Table 3 Analysis of the mediating Effect of Self-esteem between parental conflict and loneliness

	efficiency value	standard error	Bootstrap95%CI	Percentage of effect
Aggregate effect	1.1379	0.0236	[1.0916, 1.1843]	
direct effect	0.9161	0.0481	[0.8214, 1.0107]	80.5%
indirect effect	0.2219	0.0527	[0.1207, 0.3249]	19.5%

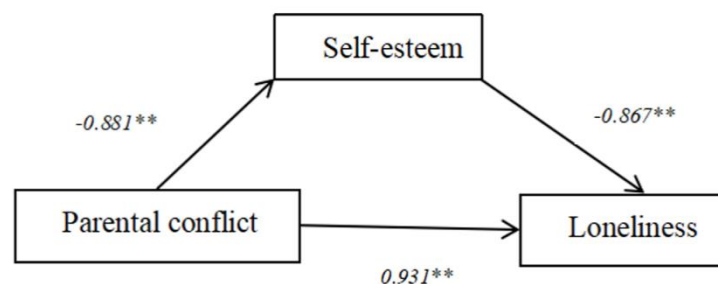


Figure 1: The mediating path model of self-esteem between parental conflict and loneliness

4. Conclusion

This article takes junior high school students as the research object and conducts a questionnaire survey using the Parental Conflict Scale, Self-esteem Scale and Loneliness Scale to explore the relationship among parental conflict, self-esteem and loneliness. The results show that parental conflicts not only have a direct effect on the loneliness of junior high school students, but also have an indirect influence on the loneliness of junior high school students through self-esteem. This result supports part of the mediating effect model. Research has found that junior high school students' overall sense of loneliness is close to a high level, their perception of conflicts between parents is not high, and their self-esteem is at a normal level. The relevant analysis results show that parental conflict is significantly positively correlated with loneliness, parental conflict is significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem, and self-esteem is significantly negatively correlated with loneliness. The spillover theory proposes that parental conflicts not only affect the marital relationship but also the parent-child relationship, resulting in individuals' low self-esteem and sense of loneliness [5]. The susceptibility stress model of depression suggests that parental conflict, as a kind of stress, is prone to cause children to have lower self-esteem [7]. Social interpersonal theory holds that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to have negative self-evaluations, lack confidence in interpersonal communication, and are reluctant to reveal themselves, leading to the occurrence of social loneliness [8]. The cognitive theory of depression proposes that negative events can activate an individual's negative perception of themselves and reduce their self-esteem. Individuals with low self-esteem tend to view life events from a negative perspective and generate negative emotions. According to the above theory, it can be explained that junior high school students exposed to parental conflicts tend to attribute the conflicts to themselves, resulting in low self-esteem. And individuals with low self-esteem will view life events from a

negative perspective, thereby generating negative emotions such as loneliness. Therefore, as a mental health education teacher, one can offer courses on the theme of loneliness, teaching students to actively be alone, increase social contact, and seek social support to improve their sense of loneliness. As parents, they should strive to maintain a harmonious marital relationship and avoid the psychological harm that conflict incidents may cause to their children. Psychological teachers and parents can also alleviate the experience of loneliness by improving junior high school students' self-perception and evaluation and enhancing their self-esteem. This study adopts a cross-sectional design, which can only reflect the situation at a certain point in time and cannot determine the causal relationship between variables. Future research can adopt longitudinal design to better understand the changes of these variables over time and their mutual influences.

References

- [1] Costello E. *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research and therapy*. *J Behav Ther Exp Psychiatry*. 1983; 14: 281.
- [2] Tanskanen J, Anttila T. A prospective study of social isolation, loneliness, and mortality in Finland. *Am J Public Health*. 2016; 106: 2042–2048.
- [3] Hickin N, Käll A, Shafran R, Sutcliffe S, Manzotti G, Langan D. The effectiveness of psychological interventions for loneliness: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clin Psychol Rev*. 2021; 88: 102066.
- [4] LIU Guang-zeng, ZHANG Da-jun, LUO Shi-lan, FANG Li-yan. Loneliness in children aged 8-12 and its relationship with parental emotional warmth and problem behaviors. *Chin J Clin Psychol*. 2018; 26: 586–589, 594.
- [5] QING Zai-hua, WU Cai-hong, CAO Jian-ping, LIU Xiao-qun, QIU Xiao-yan. The impact of parental conflict on college students' mobile phone addiction: A chain mediating model of cognitive evaluation and loneliness. *Chin J Clin Psychol*. 2017; 25: 1083–1087.
- [6] CHEN Wu, ZHOU Zong-kui, WANG Ming-zhong. Interparental conflict and depression in high school students: Mediating effect of self-esteem. *Chin J Clin Psychol*. 2013; 21: 136–138, 113.
- [7] CHI Li-ping, YU Guo-liang. The mediating role of cognitive appraisal in the relationship between marital conflict and adolescent self-esteem. *Psychol Sci*. 2008; 5: 1069–1073.
- [8] FAN Xing-hua, FANG Xiao-yi, ZHANG Shang-yan, CHEN Feng-ju, HUANG Yue-sheng. The effect of family atmosphere on loneliness in rural left-behind children: The mediating role of extraversion and self-esteem. *Chin J Clin Psychol*. 2014; 22: 680–683, 687.
- [9] LI Jia-yi, DING Wan, SUN Zhao-xing, XIE Rui-bo, ZHANG Jun-jie. Parental rearing involvement and children's loneliness: The mediating role of self-esteem and peer attachment. *Chin J Clin Psychol*. 2021; 29: 842–845, 849.
- [10] CHI Li-ping, XIN Zi-qiang. Revision of the Children's Perception of Marital Conflict Scale. *Chin Ment Health J*. 2003; 8: 554–556.
- [11] Rosenberg M. *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1965.
- [12] Russell D, Peplau LA, Cutrona CE. The revised UCLA Loneliness Scale: Concurrent and discriminant validity evidence. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 1980; 39: 472–480.