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Research article

The roles of emotional competence and social problem-solving in the relationship between physical abuse and adolescent suicidal ideation in China



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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the relationship among physical abuse, positive psychological factors including emotional competence and social problem-solving, and suicidal ideation among adolescents in China. The possible moderating effects of emotional competence and social problem-solving in the association between physical abuse and adolescent suicidal ideation were also studied. A cross-sectional survey employing convenience sampling was conducted and self-administered questionnaires were collected from 527 adolescents with mean age of 14 years from the schools in Shanghai. Results showed that physical abuse was significantly and positively related to suicidal ideation in both male and female adolescents. Emotional competence was not found to be significantly associated with adolescent suicidal ideation, but rational problem-solving, a sub-scale of social problem-solving, was shown to be significantly and negatively associated with suicidal ideation for males, but not for females. However, emotional competence and rational problem-solving were shown to be a significant and a marginally significant moderator in the relationship between physical abuse and suicidal ideation in females respectively, but not in males. High rational problem-solving buffered the negative impact of physical abuse on suicidal ideation for females. Interestingly, females with higher empathy and who reported being physically abused by their parents have higher suicidal ideation. Findings are discussed and implications are stated. It is suggested to change the attitudes of parents on the concept of physical abuse, guide them on appropriate attitudes, knowledge and skills in parenting, and enhance adolescents' skills in rational problem-solving.

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Introduction

China is a country with one of the highest suicide rates in the world, with 22.2 per 100,000 people committing suicide each year (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Suicide is the leading cause of death among young Chinese adults aged between 15 and 34 (Phillips, Li, & Zhang, 2002). The rate of adolescent suicidal ideation increased from 11.9% in 2008 to 13% in 2012 in Beijing (Yang, Han, Shao, & Su, 2013). Previous studies have shown that suicidal ideation is an important predictor of suicidal acts and completed suicide (Kwok, 2011; Thompson et al., 2012). Hence, this problem deserves attention.

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Studies have shown that suicidal behavior is associated with personal and family factors. A study that examined 392 Chinese rural youth suicide cases in 16 counties identified several suicide risk factors, namely, lack of positive coping skills and dysfunctional impulsivity (Zhang, Li, Tu, Xiao, & Jia, 2011). Family conflict and parental discipline style involving physical punishment are prominent family risk factors for suicidal behavior in Chinese adolescents (Liu, Sun, & Yang, 2008; Xing et al., 2010). Although certain empirical studies have supported the association between family risk factors and suicidality among Chinese adolescents, a dearth of investigations examining the role of positive psychological factors (e.g., emotional competence and problem-solving) in moderating the effects of adverse family situations (e.g., child abuse) on the suicidal ideation of Chinese adolescents exists.

Child Abuse in China

Despite the lack of consistent official statistics regarding the prevalence and severity of child maltreatment in China, cases involving abuse and neglect are common, considering that authoritarian parenting is practiced in Chinese families (Qiao & Chan, 2008). Among parents from 1394 primary school students, 595 (42.7%) and 301 (21.6%) reported that they have exhibited minor and severe physical maltreatment behavior toward their children during the past three months, respectively (Ma, Chen, Xiao, Wang, & Zhang, 2011). In addition, according to Leung, Wong, Chen, and Tang (2008), 15.1% and 2.8% of 6,592 junior high school students in Guangzhou, China, claimed that they had experienced “severe” and “very severe” physical maltreatment from their parents in the past six months, respectively. Hence, child abuse in China is a problem that warrants our attention.

Physical Abuse and Suicidal Ideation

Physical abuse in this study is defined as mild to severe physical maltreatment from parents but excludes corporal punishment that is regarded as the expected response of parents to persistent child misbehavior in the Chinese culture. Previous research has revealed an association between child abuse and mental health problems, including suicidal behavior. Chinese studies have shown that physical or emotional abuse from parents is significantly associated with adolescent mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and paranoid ideation (Chen, Ma, & Liang, 2008; Chen, Fu, Peng, Cai, & Zhou, 2011; Zhang, Zhang, Yang, & Zhang, 2010). In a study of 1,051 eight-year-old children, severity of physical abuse was identified as a significant predictor of suicidal ideation among other family variables (Thompson et al., 2012). Similarly, among 18 cross-sectional surveys with community samples, 16 reported a positive relationship between childhood physical abuse and suicidal ideation (Miller, Esposito-Smythers, Weismore, & Renshaw, 2013); the two other studies failed to identify an association because of the small sample size and composite outcome measure that incorporated content more than suicidality.

In Chinese societies, parents are respected as household heads (*jiazhang*) and have absolute power and authority to control and discipline their children. Parents believe that “severe beating is caring and scolding is loving” (Qiao & Chan, 2005). Chinese parents tend to use authoritarian parenting styles, e.g., physical punishment, to solve parent–child problems and conflicts, enforce family rules, and enhance the strength and endurance of their children. Such parenting style may easily lead to child abuse (Qiao & Chan, 2008). Interestingly, a study on conceptions of physical child abuse in China revealed that most parents do not regard child battering by biological parents as child abuse, and many children confess that they accept their parents’ harsh discipline because of filial piety (Qiao, 2007). Hence, association between physical abuse and adolescent suicidal ideation may differ in Chinese societies when compared with that in Western ones.

Positive Psychological Factors

Recently, increasing attention has been provided to the resilient roles of individual positive psychological factors in facing challenges and adversities. Positive psychology is the study of resilience and strength factors that contribute to positive human development and fulfillment of lives even under circumstances of adversities and hardships, leading to the improvement of one’s quality of life and a reduction in the incidence of psychopathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). By applying this framework to the current study, we investigated how particular psychosocial resilience and strength factors (emotional competence and social problem-solving) moderate the harmful impact of child abuse on the development of psychopathology (suicide ideation) among a sample of Chinese adolescents in Mainland China.

Emotional competence and social problem-solving are two of the positive psychological constructs that incorporate both emotional and cognitive–behavioral components. They provide a foundation for people to strive for individual wellbeing and flourishing. In adverse family environments (e.g., physical abuse), emotional competence and social problem-solving may reduce suicidal ideation. As such, the present study investigates physical abuse, emotional competence, and social problem-solving in relation to suicidal ideation in Chinese adolescents. The study highlights the moderating roles of these two positive psychological constructs in the association between physical abuse and adolescent suicidal ideation.

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