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Exposure to school violence at school and mental health of victimized adolescents: The mediation role of social support

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study is to examine the mediation role of social support in the relationship between exposure to violence at school and mental health among adolescents within the framework of two structured models via structural equation model (SEM). The participants consist of a total of 1420 9th, 10th, and 11th grades high school students (54.5% girls and 45.5% boys). The students' ages ranged from 14 to 18 years with a mean of 16.11 (SD = 0.91) for total sample. 38 percent of the participants are in the 9th grade, 34.1 percent are in the 10th grade, and 28 percent are in the 11th grade. Findings from both models indicated that social support mediated the relationships between exposure to violence and mental health among adolescents. Additionally, both models showed that the associations between exposure to violence, social support and mental health varied by gender. Contributions and implications of the current findings are discussed in detail.

1. Introduction

School violence, as a concept, has become widely used since 1992, and a considerable amount of research has been conducted to understand school violence in more detail (Furlong & Morrison, 1994). School violence is not an issue of a particular culture or society. Examining the existing literature, school violence is considered to be a problem of both developing countries and advanced countries in spite of the fact that they have different structures and contents (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001; Shapiro, Burgoon, Welker, & Clough, 2002). The percentage of adolescents exposed to violence at school is quite high. For example Flannery, Wester, and Singer (2004) found that over 44% of the adolescents reported that they had been exposed to violence at school.

A growing body of research points to the adverse effects of being a victim of school violence on students' physical and mental health (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Due et al., 2005; Estévez, Musitu, & Herrero, 2005; Janosz et al., 2008; Natvig, Albreksten, & Qvarnstrom, 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1999; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995; Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004). For example Natvig et al. (2001) found that adolescents exposed to violence suffered from psychosomatic symptoms such as headache and backache. Schwab-Stone et al. (1995) found that adolescents exposed to violence reported high levels of depression and anxiety. A similar finding of Estévez et al. (2005) is that victimization at school was positively related to psychological distress (depressive symptomatology and perceived stress). In their longitudinal study, Janosz et al. (2008) reported that actual victimization at school more reliably estimated later internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety. Overall, these studies highlighted that exposure to violence has adverse effects on adolescents' mental and physical health.

One of the best ways to understand the violence in schools is to focus on mutual and complex relationship between the individual and the environment (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Developed by Bronfenbrenner (1994), the ecological systems theory focuses on

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various environmental factors and their interaction with each other. An ecological system is defined by five interwoven system circles from smaller to bigger. Those interwoven systems are microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. This research focuses on micro and meso systems in relation to the effect of violence at school on adolescents. Microsystem includes the relations of adolescents with family, teachers, school environment, and peers (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Mesosystem is related to the interaction of two or more microsystems. For example, the relation of the adolescent with his/her family and his/her teachers can affect his/her perception of the school environment and his/her relationships with peers. In this concept, the level of social support from teacher, peer and family is supposed to be a protective factor in coping with the violence at school.

Existing literature has recognized the critical role of social support in reducing the detrimental effects of negative experiences on adolescents' mental health (Henrich & Shahar, 2008; Youngstrom, Weist, & Albus, 2003). Youngstrom et al. (2003) found that family support moderated the effects of stress and cumulative risks on internalizing symptoms and externalizing behaviors among urban adolescents. Similarly, Henrich and Shahar (2008) stated that social support eliminated the negative impact of increased depression and worked as a protecting factor in periods of traumatic stress among adolescents. In the same vein, Garcia-Reid, Reid, and Peterson (2005) concluded that both school-related social support and self-system factors such as scholastic competence and social acceptance are crucial for adolescents' subjective well-being in school.

1.1. School violence and social support

Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) pointed out that a well-organized school, which meets students' academic and psychological needs, has teachers supporting their students, has a consensus that all students can learn in school, supports peer culture and has a safe and supportive school environment, is likely to produce positive outcomes for students and to reduce problem behaviors. One of the factors that produce positive outcomes at school and reduce problem behaviors of students is social support. Numerous studies have indicated that social support has a protective role in the relationship between exposure to school violence and psychological well-being of adolescents (Chen & Wei, 2013; Cooley, Fite, Rubens, & Tunno, 2015; Holt & Espelage, 2005; Flaspohler et al., 2009; Hammack, Richards, Luo, Edlynn, & Roy, 2004; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1999). For example, some studies emphasize that social support protects adolescents from the undesirable effects of exposure to violence (Hammack et al., 2004); exposure to violence is primarily related to internalizing symptoms and social support buffers the effects of exposure to violence on the adjustment of adolescents (Prinstein et al., 2001). Similarly, Holt and Espelage (2005) found that social support moderated the relationship between victimization and psychological well-being, specifically for African American boys. Cooley et al. (2015) revealed that social support from a peer buffered the effect of relational victimization on depressive symptoms among adolescents. Briefly, existing literature shows that support from peers, teachers, classmates and adults at school functions as a protective factor on psychological health and adjustment of adolescents to school. While social support protects and increases the subjective well-being and adjustment of students to school, lack of support from peers, teachers and classmates may affect them negatively. The mediating role of social support in relation to peer victimization and well-being of victims has attracted a lot of attention in recent years (e.g. Chen & Wei, 2013; Flaspohler et al., 2009). For instance, Chen and Wei (2013) reported that peer support had a mediator role in the relationship between peer victimization and the psychological health of junior-high students. They concluded that students who are exposed to violence at school are more likely to perceive less available support from peers, which in turn increases their risk to psychological distress. Therefore, it is possible that exposure to violence at school impacts adolescents' mental health via social support. The mediating role of social support in relation to exposure to violence at school and mental health will be tested by the current study.

1.2. The current study

Existing literature indicated that there are strong relationships between exposure to violence, social support and mental health among adolescents. Two important themes have emerged from the studies discussed so far: (a) exposure to violence has adverse effects on adolescents' mental health, and (b) social support reduces the adverse effects of violence on adolescents' mental health. Although extensive studies have been carried out on the relationships between exposure to violence, social support, and mental health, there is still a need for new studies. According to Furlong, Manuel, Corral, Chung, and Bates (1997), school violence is a broad concept that covers a wide range of behaviors, including acts of physical harm and psychological harm such as verbal taunts, threats, bullying, and sexual and ethnic harassment. First of all, when examining the links between exposure to violence and mental health, most of the previous studies were found to be limited to the effects of bullying, physical and verbal violence on adolescents' mental health separately. For example, Due et al. (2005) and Natvig et al. (2001) examine the effects of bullying; Crick and Grotpeter (1995) of relational violence; Estévez et al. (2005) of physical and verbal violence, and Storch and Masia-Warner (2004) of physical and relational violence on mental health. Very little is known about the effects of exposure to multiple forms of violence on adolescents' mental health. Indeed in a meta-analysis study, Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, and Kenny (2003) indicated that the negative effects of exposure to multiple forms of violence are not clear enough. According to Kitzmann et al. (2003) exposure to multiple types of violence might increase the risk of undesirable effects. Therefore, investigating effects of multiple forms of school violence on adolescents' mental health may help to improve our understanding of their adverse effects. Secondly, regarding the role of social support in the relationship between exposure to violence and adolescents' well-being, except Hammack et al. (2004) and Rigby and Slee (1999), most of the studies have only focused on one or two sources of social support about the relationships between exposure to violence and mental health. For example, while some authors examined the role of peer support in the relationship of exposure to violence and mental health (Chen & Wei, 2013; Cooley et al., 2015; Prinstein et al., 2001), others highlighted the role of family and

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