Prediction of Psychological Pain Based on Emotional Expression with the Mediation of Fear of Intimacy in Girls with Emotional Breakup Experience

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the present study was to predict psychological pain based on emotional expression with the mediation of fear of intimacy in girls with emotional breakup experience.

Methods: The research design was applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-correlational in terms of method. The statistical population of the study included girls aged 20 to 35 with emotional breakup experience in Tehran in 2020, of whom 392 were selected using the convenience sampling method. They responded to the Auerbach and Mikulincer (2003) Mental Pain Questionnaire, the King and Emmons (1990) Emotional Expression Questionnaire, and the Descutner and Thelen (1991) Fear of Intimacy Scale. Data were analyzed using structural equations and SPSS and AMOS software.

Findings: The findings showed that the direct path coefficient of fear of intimacy ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$) to psychological pain was positive and significant, but the path coefficients of the types of emotional expression to psychological pain were not significant ($p > 0.05$). The direct path coefficients of positive emotional expression ($\beta = -0.10$, $p < 0.05$) and expression of intimacy ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.01$) to fear of intimacy were negative and significant, while the path coefficient of negative emotional expression ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$) to fear of intimacy was positive and significant. The indirect path coefficients of the types of emotional expression to psychological pain in girls with emotional breakup experience through fear of intimacy were not significant ($p > 0.05$).

Conclusion: The results indicated that although fear of intimacy neutralized the effects of different types of emotional expression on psychological pain in girls with emotional breakup experience, it did not mediate the relationship between the types of emotional expression.

Keywords: psychological pain, emotional expression, fear of intimacy, emotional breakup experience, girls

1. Introduction

A happy and self-actualized adult is someone who has the ability to love and establish long-term relationships (Moita & Wieser, 2018), as the need for love and belonging is one of the fundamental characteristics of humans and a basic need from childhood to old age (Ghazi Nejad et al., 2020). Romantic relationships form a significant part of the lives of most young people (Ratto, 2014). While love is one of the most astonishing emotions an individual can experience, it can also be one of the most painful. Sometimes romantic relationships break apart for various reasons, and the end of a romantic relationship is one of the most painful experiences individuals may encounter in their lives. The exit from the romantic phase of love involves stages similar to other forms of grief, and the mental health of individuals who experience romantic breakup is at risk (Sbarra, 2012). In fact, emotional breakup includes a set of severe symptoms that appear after the sudden disintegration of a romantic relationship (Popal & Dehkhoda, 2015), negatively affecting the individual's performance in various domains such as academic, social, and occupational areas. It leads to irrational reactions, and these symptoms often persist for a long time (Ghazi Nejad et al., 2020). Additionally, a sense of hopelessness and terrible humiliation may arise after separating from a loved one, leaving the individual in a state of sadness and isolation (Seiler, 2013, as cited in Vojdian, Arefi, & Manshaei, 2020).

However, individuals vary significantly in the intensity of their responses to the end of romantic relationships, depending on their personality traits and behavioral patterns. Some recover quickly and return to normal life, while others exhibit significant emotional distress. This is influenced by their motivations, abilities, desires, beliefs, and thoughts in coping with or not tolerating emotional failure due to love. One of the issues that may arise following romantic breakup is psychological pain, which can be attributed to feelings of grief and intense yearning for the person we love after a traumatic loss (Tossani, 2013). It refers to the emergence of a negative sense of self resulting from loss (Meerwijk et al., 2015; Meerwijk & Weiss, 2018), an unpleasant feeling stemming from psychological needs such as love, dependency, striving for success, and the avoidance of harm and shame (Meerwijk & Weiss, 2018). In fact, individuals experience psychological pain when they are separated from important people in their lives (Karami et al., 2018). Many factors influence the level of psychological pain experienced when separated from significant others, and attachment styles can be considered one of these factors, as belonging can be viewed as an expression of attachment (Fisher, 2014).

On the other hand, emotional breakup is emotionally difficult and painful for the individual. Negative emotions usually emerge after a romantic breakup, and the individual often loses the ability to manage and appropriately express emotions (Aghajani et al., 2018). Therefore, traumatic emotional experiences have negative psychological and physical consequences and are considered influential factors in the psychological pain resulting from loss. Emotional expression, as one of the core components of emotion, refers to the degree to which an individual actively expresses their emotional experiences through verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Emotional expression, in contrast to emotional suppression, plays an important role in adaptive human functioning and has positive health outcomes (Kaplan & Sadock, 2011). Through emotional catharsis, emotional expression allows feelings and emotions to be expressed in appropriate ways, preventing them from being expressed through psychosomatic symptoms (Shafiei et al., 2019; Tajeryan et al., 2023). The type, level, and variety of emotional expression affect an individual's health. Individuals who manage their emotions experience lower levels of fear of stress and negative emotions and are capable of understanding and regulating emotions, leading to positive experiences. They evaluate, manage, and express their emotions, recognizing and expressing them at appropriate times (Vojdian et al., 2020; Yousefi et al., 2017).

Given that the ability to establish and maintain intimacy with others helps individuals cope with interpersonal problems (Montesi et al., 2013), and avoidance of intimacy is a characteristic of individuals who describe their relationships as less satisfying, the mediator variable in this study was fear of intimacy. Those who fear or avoid intimacy are likely to find it difficult to approach others and form warm, satisfying relationships (Phillips et al., 2013). Sobral, Matos, and Costa (2015) define intimacy as a communicative event in which genuine self-disclosure is met with empathy. They note that such self-disclosure may increase the sense of vulnerability, but individuals must necessarily accept the risk of revealing their vulnerability to gain intimacy. Those who fear vulnerability are likely to also fear intimacy and may experience more problems in their important relationships (Sobral et al., 2015). Sobral, Matos, and Costa (2015) conceptualized fear of intimacy as an inhibited ability to exchange important personal thoughts and feelings with others due to anxiety (Sobral et al., 2015). Individuals who fear intimacy desire interpersonal

relationships but are afraid of rejection, leading to anxiety during verbal and nonverbal interactions with others. Other aspects that involve the need for intimacy include the fear of becoming dependent on others (Vangelisti & Beck, 2007).

Given the lack of research investigating the variables of the present study in the form of a model to predict psychological pain in individuals with emotional breakup experiences, the present study aims to answer the following question: Can emotional expression predict psychological pain in girls with emotional breakup experience, with the mediation of fear of intimacy?

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study is applied in terms of its purpose and quantitative in terms of data collection. The research design is descriptive-correlational and will be conducted using path analysis. It is correlational as it examines the relationship between two predictor variables and one criterion variable, with the mediation of one mediating variable. The statistical population of this study consists of girls aged 20 to 35 with emotional breakup experience in Tehran during the year 2020-2021. The sample will be selected using a non-random convenience sampling method. In this type of sampling, individuals are defined based on their relative ease of accessibility. Since accurate statistics of girls with emotional breakup experiences in the city are not available, a call will be issued on social media platforms (Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp) inviting girls residing in Tehran who meet the study's inclusion criteria to participate, provided they consent. Given the correlational nature of the study, and based on Huite and Cramer's (2004) suggestion to select 20-40 participants for each component, and considering the potential for dropout and attrition, 392 participants were selected as the study sample. The inclusion criteria were: having an emotional breakup experience, having at least a high school diploma, being within the age range of 20 to 35 years, and providing informed consent. The exclusion criterion was failure to complete the questionnaires. Data were collected through two methods:

a) Library Research: To formulate the theoretical foundations, valid Persian and English books and articles were used, and internet searches were conducted to access articles.

b) Field Studies: Data collection was done using questionnaires distributed among the statistical sample.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to adhere to health protocols, the research questionnaires were converted into electronic forms to facilitate easier access for participants. The questionnaires were distributed to a number of participants who were accessible to the researcher. After explaining the study's objectives and ensuring confidentiality, participants were asked to carefully complete the questionnaires. They were also asked to share the questionnaire link with others who met the inclusion criteria and could reliably complete the questionnaires, while avoiding sharing the link in Telegram groups or other social media platforms. Finally, the collected data were analyzed.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Mental Pain

The Mental Pain Scale was developed by Auerbach and Mikulincer in 2003 to measure the intensity of mental pain. This scale consists of 44 items and 9 subscales: irreversibility, lack of control, numbness, worthlessness, emotional turmoil, alienation, confusion, social distancing, and emptiness (meaninglessness). The questionnaire is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In Auerbach and Mikulincer's (2003) study, the test-retest reliability coefficient over a 3-week period in a sample of 53 participants (30 women and 23 men) ranged between 0.79 and 0.94. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were as follows: irreversibility (0.95), lack of control (0.95), worthlessness (0.95), emotional turmoil (0.93), numbness (0.85), alienation (0.79), confusion (0.80), social distancing (0.80), and emptiness (0.75). In Karami et al.'s (2018) study, exploratory factor analysis identified six factors, which together explained 40.6% of the variance in mental pain. The Cronbach's alpha for the overall mental pain questionnaire was 0.96, and for the subscales: emptiness and worthlessness (0.95), confusion and emotional turmoil (0.96), lack of control (0.87), irreversibility (0.87), social distancing (0.80), alienation (0.86), and fear of loneliness (0.61) (Karami et al., 2018).

2.2.2. Emotional Expression

This questionnaire was designed by King and Emmons (1990) to assess emotional expression and consists of 16 items. It includes three subscales: positive emotional expression, expression of intimacy, and negative emotional expression. The questionnaire is based on a five-point Likert

scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score ranges from 16 to 80, with higher scores indicating higher emotional expression. Convergent validity was examined through the positive correlation between scores on the Emotional Expression Questionnaire and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) Positive Affect Scale. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding values of 0.68 for the overall scale, and 0.65, 0.59, and 0.68 for the subscales of positive emotional expression, expression of intimacy, and negative emotional expression, respectively, all significant at α = 0.001. In the study by Navabi Far, Atashpar, and Golparvar (2020), the Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale and subscales was 0.79, 0.77, 0.73, and 0.77, respectively, all significant at α = 0.001 (Navabi Far et al., 2020).

2.2.3. Fear of Intimacy

The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) was developed by Descutner and Thelen (1991) as a 35-item self-report measure to assess anxiety related to close relationships, regardless of whether individuals are currently in a romantic relationship. The scale reveals individuals' fears across a wide range of interpersonal situations and relationships (Sherman & Thelen, 1996). Participants are asked to imagine themselves in a close relationship while completing the scale, rating each of the 35 items on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all descriptive of me) to 5 (very descriptive of me). Descutner and Thelen (1991) found that individuals with high scores on the FIS have numerous difficulties with intimacy. Compared to low scorers, they report that others find it hard to get to know them, their relationships usually last less than a few months, they are less satisfied with the quality of their romantic relationships, they feel uncomfortable becoming intimate with others, they do not expect to feel satisfied after marriage or long-term relationships, and they tend to feel much lonelier than others. In Descutner and Thelen's (1991) sample, participants' scores on the 35-item FIS ranged from 40 to 132, with a mean of 78.75 (men: 81.90; women: 76.10) and a standard deviation of 21.82 (men: 20.52; women: 22.61). A score one

standard deviation above the mean indicates fear of intimacy. Descutner and Thelen (1991) established the scale's reliability and validity using a student sample. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.93, and the test-retest reliability was 0.89 (r = 0.89). Factor analysis indicated a single dominant factor accounting for 33.4% of the variance, suggesting the scale's unidimensional construct validity. In the Iranian context, Fallahzadeh et al. (2011) normed the scale, reporting internal consistency for the overall scale of 0.83, and for the two subfactors: 0.81 for Factor 1 and 0.79 for Factor 2. The test-retest reliability for the overall scale was 0.92, and for the two subfactors: 0.87 and 0.85, respectively (Shafiei et al., 2019).

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics section included tables, charts, mean, and standard deviation, and in the inferential statistics section, Pearson correlation, path analysis, and structural equation modeling were used, provided that parametric test assumptions were met. SPSS and AMOS software were used for the final data analysis.

3. Findings and Results

In terms of demographic findings, the majority of the girls in the sample group were aged 24-27 years (26.5%), most of them had a bachelor's degree (33.7%), and the majority were students (43.4%). Most of the participants came from families with a middle socioeconomic status (50.5%). The descriptive findings of the research variables (emotional expression, fear of intimacy, and psychological pain) in the sample group are presented in the table below.

As shown in Table 1, the mean (standard deviation) scores of the participants were as follows: academic performance 17.93 (1.88), digital self-efficacy 92.56 (20.70), and academic self-concept 43.79 (14.66). Additionally, the skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were between -2 and +2, indicating a normal distribution of the data. Pearson correlation test results are reported below.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Component	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum Score	Maximum Score
Emotional Expression	Positive Emotional Expression	18.53	4.14	7	31
	Expression of Intimacy	12.01	3.06	5	23
	Negative Emotional Expression	15.17	3.80	6	20
Fear of Intimacy		112.28	23.12	44	175
Psychological Pain (Total Score)		157.56	29.89	49	218
Components of Psychological Pain	Irreversibility	33.69	7.18	9	41
	Lack of Control	36.19	8.16	12	50
	Numbness (Stupor)	12.16	3.87	5	15
	Worthlessness	15.67	4.44	5	24
	Emotional Turmoil	17.31	5.18	7	25
	Alienation	9.14	3.19	3	15
	Confusion	10.15	3.21	5	15
	Social Distancing	13.57	4.17	4	20
	Emptiness (Meaninglessness)	9.68	2.48	3	15

The results of Table 1 indicate that the highest mean emotional expression among the girls in the sample was for positive emotional expression, with a mean (and standard deviation) of 18.53 (4.14), and the lowest mean was for expression of intimacy, with a mean (and standard deviation) of 12.01 (3.06). Additionally, the mean (and standard deviation) for fear of intimacy among the sample was 112.28 (23.12). Finally, the mean (and standard deviation) for psychological pain in the sample was 157.56 (29.89). The table below shows the correlation coefficients between the research variables (emotional expression as exogenous variables, fear of intimacy as a mediator, and psychological pain as an endogenous variable) in the sample.

Table 2

Correlation Coefficients Between Research Variables

Variables	Fear of Intimacy	Psychological Pain
Positive Emotional Expression	-0.31 (p = 0.001)	-0.17 (p = 0.001)
Expression of Intimacy	-0.37 (p = 0.001)	-0.20 (p = 0.001)
Negative Emotional Expression	0.40 (p = 0.001)	0.22 (p = 0.001)
Fear of Intimacy	1 (–)	0.37 (p = 0.001)
Psychological Pain (Total Score)	0.37 (p = 0.001)	1 (–)
Irreversibility	0.13 (p = 0.008)	0.56 (p = 0.001)
Lack of Control	0.17 (p = 0.001)	0.61 (p = 0.001)
Numbness (Stupor)	0.22 (p = 0.001)	0.64 (p = 0.001)
Worthlessness	0.26 (p = 0.001)	0.70 (p = 0.001)
Emotional Turmoil	0.39 (p = 0.001)	0.74 (p = 0.001)
Alienation	0.20 (p = 0.001)	0.55 (p = 0.001)
Confusion	0.27 (p = 0.001)	0.71 (p = 0.001)
Social Distancing	0.41 (p = 0.001)	0.60 (p = 0.001)
Emptiness (Meaninglessness)	0.11 (p = 0.031)	0.59 (p = 0.001)

According to the results presented in Table 2, positive emotional expression and intimacy were negatively and significantly correlated with fear of intimacy and psychological pain ($p < 0.01$). In contrast, negative emotional expression was positively and significantly correlated with fear of intimacy ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$) and psychological pain ($r = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, fear of intimacy was positively and significantly correlated with psychological pain ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$).

To determine the adequacy of the model fit with the data, several fit indices were used, such as chi-square goodness-of-fit test (χ^2), chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). In the modified model, the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) was 3.98, indicating a good model fit. The GFI,

AGFI, NFI, CFI, IFI, and TLI values for the modified model were 0.93, 0.92, 0.92, 0.91, 0.90, and 0.91, respectively, indicating a good model fit for the present study. Additionally, the RMSEA value (0.07) indicated an acceptable model fit.

Table 3

Parameters of Direct Relationships Between Variables

Path	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (ß)	Critical Ratio	p
Positive Emotional Expression to Psychological Pain	-0.19	0.32	-0.04	-1.22	0.461
Intimacy Expression to Psychological Pain	-0.23	0.26	-0.05	-1.56	0.325
Negative Emotional Expression to Psychological Pain	0.25	0.18	0.05	1.68	0.306
Fear of Intimacy to Psychological Pain	0.44	0.05	0.15	4.11	0.001
Positive Emotional Expression to Fear of Intimacy	-0.35	0.11	-0.10	-3.00	0.011
Intimacy Expression to Fear of Intimacy	-0.43	0.06	-0.15	-4.01	0.001
Negative Emotional Expression to Fear of Intimacy	0.51	0.07	0.15	3.97	0.001

Based on the findings reported in Table 3, the direct path coefficient of fear of intimacy (ß = 0.15, p < 0.01) to psychological pain was positive and significant. However, the path coefficients of the types of emotional expression to psychological pain were not significant (p > 0.05). Regarding the significance of the path coefficients of the exogenous variables in the model to fear of intimacy as a mediating variable, the results showed that the direct path coefficients of positive emotional expression (ß = -0.10, p < 0.05) and expression of intimacy (ß = -0.15, p < 0.01) to fear of intimacy were negative and significant. In contrast, the path coefficient of negative emotional expression (ß = 0.15, p < 0.01) to fear of intimacy was positive and significant.

Table 4 reports the mediation analysis of indirect relationships using the bootstrap method to test the hypothesis that "emotional expression with the mediation of fear of intimacy predicts psychological pain in girls with emotional breakup experience."

Table 4

Estimation of Indirect Pathways of Emotional Expression to Psychological Pain Using Bootstrap

Indirect Path	Unstandardized Indirect Coefficient	Standardized Indirect Coefficient	Standard Error	Critical Ratio	p
Positive Emotional Expression to Psychological Pain	0.12	0.01	0.16	0.64	0.600
Intimacy Expression to Psychological Pain	0.15	0.02	0.14	0.58	0.744
Negative Emotional Expression to Psychological Pain	0.10	0.01	0.24	0.12	0.798

As the results in Table 4 indicate, the indirect path coefficients of the types of emotional expression to psychological pain in girls with emotional breakup experience through fear of intimacy were not significant (p > 0.05). This means that although fear of intimacy neutralized the effects of different types of emotional expression on psychological pain in girls with emotional breakup experience, it did not mediate the relationship between the types of emotional expression.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to predict psychological pain based on emotional expression with the mediation of fear of intimacy in girls with emotional breakup experience. The results showed that the indirect path coefficients of the types of emotional expression to psychological pain in girls with emotional breakup experience through fear of intimacy were not significant. This indicates that although fear of intimacy neutralized the effects of different types of emotional expression on psychological pain in these girls, it did not

play a mediating role in the relationship between emotional expression and psychological pain. These results align with prior the findings (Gholizadeh & Farrokhzad, 2019; Vuillier et al., 2018).

To explain this finding, it can be said that emotions are a key component of life. If emotions are intensified and excessive for a long time, there is a high probability that they will lead to serious physical, psychological, or social problems for the individual. However, when a person can regulate their emotions in a positive and effective way and express them in a manner that is positive and based on intimacy, they are likely to react differently to life situations, including emotional breakups. The emotional and psychological state of an individual is a crucial determinant of how they view themselves and events. In such circumstances, focusing on positive emotional regulation and expression may reduce negative emotions and enhance positive ones, which can strengthen the individual's positive and meaningful response to chronic illness, reflecting a form of post-traumatic growth.

More specifically, on one hand, reappraisal and acceptance strategies, which are positive emotion regulation strategies, and positive emotional expression reduce the likelihood of negative emotions and increase the likelihood of experiencing positive emotions. On the other hand, positive affect decreases the impact of negative emotions on the individual and, by increasing physical, social, and mental resources, broadens the individual's behavioral repertoire (Fredrickson, 2000). Positive emotions, which are likely to result from positive emotion regulation and expression, provide an opportunity to expand resources and social relationships, preparing the individual to effectively cope with future challenges (Hofman, 2015). For instance, when a person benefits from positive emotion regulation and expression, the likelihood of experiencing tension and distress in interpersonal relationships decreases, and they experience more positive emotions. When thinking about romantic relationships, they have a more favorable attitude and experience more positive emotions, leading to a perception of growth. They feel they have grown emotionally.

As for the non-significance of the mediating role of fear of intimacy, it can be explained by noting that intimacy is one of the subsets of emotional expression, and individuals with high emotional expression can express their emotions intimately. Therefore, fear of intimacy could not function as a mediating or intervening variable.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Every study has limitations, and the present research is no exception. Some of the limitations include the following: due to the COVID-19 pandemic, electronic questionnaires were used for data collection, which may have affected the research results. Additionally, the use of self-report scales to assess the variables in this study is a limitation, as some participants may have deliberately or unintentionally distorted their responses rather than providing an accurate and valid reflection of themselves. Participants may have attempted to present themselves in an idealized way in response to the scales, potentially introducing response bias. The sampling method in this study was convenience sampling, so caution should be taken when generalizing the findings beyond the study's population. The variables in this research may have been influenced by cultural variables, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, family structure, and other factors, which are limitations of the study.

Based on the findings, future researchers are encouraged to use other methods for completing questionnaires, including in-person completion if possible, and to employ additional data collection methods. Where possible, random sampling methods should be used to increase the generalizability of the findings. To enhance the internal validity of the research, extraneous variables should be controlled, meaning that variables such as cultural background and socioeconomic status that may influence the research outcome should be considered by future researchers. Since this study is correlational and does not examine causal relationships between variables, future researchers are encouraged to investigate the research variables through experimental studies. Given that emotional expression impacts the adjustment to emotional grief and psychological pain, it is recommended that emotional expression training be included in educational programs for young people and general courses. This would be a positive step toward empowering them to deal with emotional crises and protect themselves through appropriate emotional expression.

In light of the findings, it is also suggested that relevant organizations such as the Iranian Psychological Association, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and other competent authorities organize free educational workshops on emotional breakup intervention and youth empowerment to reduce their vulnerability during such crises.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

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