

The Relationship Between Child Attitudes Towards Parents and Histrionic Personality Traits: The Mediating Role of Defense Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the present study was to determine the mediating role of self-regulation in predicting academic self-handicapping among lower secondary school students based on their attachment to parents, peers, and teachers.

Methods and Materials: This research falls under the category of descriptive-correlational studies, utilizing structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of all female lower secondary school students in Tehran. The sample included 384 participants selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987), Teacher Attachment Scale (Eliot & Mikulincer, 2006), Self-Handicapping Scale (Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982), and the Academic Self-Regulation Questionnaire (Bouffard et al., 1995). Descriptive statistical indices such as mean and standard deviation were used. In the inferential statistics section, structural equation modeling and Pearson correlation methods were employed using SPSS.22 and AMOS.22 software for data analysis.

Findings: The findings indicated a significant negative relationship between attachment to parents ($\beta = -0.668, p < 0.01$), attachment to peers ($\beta = -0.256, p < 0.01$), attachment to teachers ($\beta = -0.051, p < 0.05$), and students' academic self-handicapping. Additionally, there was a significant positive relationship between attachment to parents ($\beta = 0.318, p < 0.01$), attachment to peers ($\beta = 0.340, p < 0.01$), attachment to teachers ($\beta = 0.242, p < 0.01$), and students' academic self-regulation. A significant negative relationship was also found between academic self-regulation and students' academic self-handicapping ($\beta = -0.233, p < 0.01$). Furthermore, significant negative relationships were observed between attachment to parents ($\beta = -0.074, p < 0.01$), attachment to peers ($\beta = -0.079, p < 0.01$), attachment to teachers ($\beta = -0.057, p < 0.01$), and students' academic self-handicapping.

Conclusion: Therefore, it was concluded that academic self-regulation significantly and negatively mediates the relationship between attachment to parents, peers, and teachers, and academic self-handicapping.

Keywords: self-regulation, academic self-handicapping, students, attachment.

1. Introduction

Personality disorders are among the most common mental health problems, affecting 7.8% of the global population (Winsper et al., 2020), with symptoms manifesting over several decades (Sadock & Sadock, 2010). Personality disorders are characterized by complex issues in both interpersonal and intrapersonal life experiences (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Histrionic personality disorder is recognized in both the International Classification of Diseases and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Histrionic personality disorder is a clinical syndrome where individuals exhibit an interpersonal interaction style marked by seductiveness, emotional superficiality, and dramatic behavior. This disorder is primarily characterized by exaggerated emotional expression and the use of seductive or provocative behavior to attract and maintain others' attention (Amiri & Jamali, 2019).

According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, individuals with histrionic personality disorder are driven by a desire to be the center of attention. They are often seductive, flirtatious, and sexually provocative. In addition to their exaggerated emotional expressions, they tend to be superficial and disregard others' feelings. Despite often describing themselves as attractive, these individuals' flamboyant and ostentatious behaviors usually prevent them from maintaining deep attachments for long periods, resulting in superficial relationships (Sadock & Sadock, 2010).

The cognitive style of these individuals is impulsive and stereotypical. Although they like to present themselves as astute, insightful, and very independent, they are actually vague, superficial, and highly dependent, easily distinguishing between their inner or real selves and their outer or public personas. Their emotional style is characterized by exaggerated emotional displays, irritability, sudden outbursts, and irrational tantrums (Savci et al., 2020). Research shows that histrionic behaviors encompass a wide range of actions, including a desire to be the center of attention (Edwards, 2017; Hawk et al., 2019); inappropriate behaviors such as seductive or sexually provocative actions (van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2017); emotional instability (Panger, 2017); seeking attention through physical appearance (Fardouly et al., 2017); excessively impressionistic behaviors (Carpenter, 2012; Singh et al., 2018); manipulative behaviors (Qiu et al., 2015); a need for

closer relationships (Butler & Matook, 2015); and being easily influenced (Bacev-Giles & Haji, 2017).

Despite most studies focusing on the mother-child relationship in early life, as Bromario and Kerns (2022) indicate, the mother-child relationship continues to have an impact in adulthood. When children interact with their mother, they form a mental representation or working model of their attachment figure based on their real experiences and perceptions of the relationship (Brumariu & Kerns, 2022). Due to the lack of an active physical presence of the father, the child fails to establish a meaningful psychological connection with him (Berman, 2021). Although classic psychoanalytic perspectives report developmental disturbances, including an immature ego structure, fixation at the oral stage, and incomplete ego controls in children who experience the absence of a father during the pre-Oedipal stage, more profound structural impacts follow the ineffective and inactive presence of the father in the child's developmental processes. Father-deprived children may fail to meet specific developmental needs within the framework of separation-individuation, Oedipal complex development, sexual identity formation, and object relations shaping, leading to negative outcomes such as anxiety, shame, loneliness, and sadness. Defense mechanisms are automatic processes that reduce conflicts, mitigate the effects of changing external and internal realities, modify conscious experiences, and regulate an individual's emotional response (Romeo et al., 2022).

In examining the relationship between defense patterns and personality disorder domains, researchers concluded that immature defenses predict dysfunctional personality domains (Granieri et al., 2017), while mature mechanisms are generally associated with better personality functioning. Contemporary psychoanalysis views defense mechanisms as part of normal relational patterns and growth that protect the ego and contribute to individual adaptation (Di Giuseppe et al., 2019). Overall, ego strength is a crucial determinant of the self's structural health and personality health, enhancing mental health. Given the aforementioned explanations, this study seeks to determine whether defense mechanisms mediate the relationship between parental attitudes and histrionic personality disorder.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is fundamental in nature and descriptive-correlational in terms of data collection. The

statistical population included all students of Tehran universities. The sampling method was multi-stage cluster sampling. The minimum required sample size for this study was calculated based on the critical N index of Holter, which for the hypothetical model of the study and based on latent and observed variables, was found to be 142.14. Considering the minimum required sample size when the model's observed variables (25 parameters in the hypothetical model of this study) are between 10 and 15 variables, the sample size should be between 250 to 400 people. Thus, the total sample selected in this study was 441 people. Inclusion criteria were a definitive diagnosis of histrionic personality disorder based on the Histrionic Personality Scale and being an undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral student at Tehran universities, with informed consent to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria included withdrawal from the study and incomplete questionnaires.

Ethical considerations included a commitment to maintaining personal information confidentiality, using pseudonyms for participants, voluntary participation, and researcher responsibility.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Histrionic Personality

The Brief Histrionic Personality Scale was designed by Christopher, Ferguson, and Ngai in 2014. Initially, 36 items were selected to form the Histrionic Personality Scale based on DSM-5 criteria for identifying histrionic personality disorder. The items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1: Always wrong; 2: Somewhat true; 3: Often true; 4: Always true). The subscale of seductiveness showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.67 and the attention-seeking subscale 0.74. The overall validity of this scale, using Cronbach's alpha, was found to be 0.76 (Amiri & Jamali, 2019).

2.2.2. Child Attitude Towards Parents

This questionnaire, designed by Hudson in 1992, includes two forms specific to father and mother, with the father form used in this study. This 25-item scale is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (Never to Always) and measures the degree of adolescent satisfaction with their relationship with their father. It is used for children aged 12 and above. Abdollahzadeh et al. (2018) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.97 for this questionnaire, indicating its internal consistency (Brumariu & Kerns, 2022).

2.2.3. Defense Style

The Defense Style Questionnaire by Andrews, Singh, Bond, and colleagues (1993) includes 40 items rated on a 9-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), assessing 20 defense mechanisms across three styles: mature, neurotic, and immature. Questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 21, 24, 29, and 35 assess the mature defense style; questions 1, 6, 11, 17, 28, 33, 34, and 40 assess the neurotic defense style; and the remaining questions assess the immature defense style. Mature defense mechanisms include sublimation, humor, anticipation, and suppression, while the neurotic defense style includes undoing, pseudo-altruism, idealization, and reaction formation. The neurotic defense style includes undoing, pseudo-altruism, idealization, and reaction formation. The immature defense style consists of twelve mechanisms: projection, passive aggression, acting out, isolation, devaluation, autistic fantasy, denial, displacement, splitting, isolation of affect, rationalization, and somatization. Andrews et al. (1993) reported test-retest correlations ranging from 0.46 to 0.86, with Cronbach's alpha for mature, neurotic, and immature defense styles being 0.68, 0.58, and 0.80, respectively (Andrews et al., 1993; Mehboodi et al., 2022).

2.3. Data analysis

Statistical software SPSS-22 and Lisrel-8.85 were used for data classification, processing, and analysis, and to test the research hypotheses. The fit of the hypothetical model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). Before analysis, assumptions related to the SEM statistical method were examined to ensure the data's suitability for analysis. Data analysis was conducted using a two-step approach. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to assess the fit of the measurement model, and in the second step, the hypothetical structural model was tested using SEM.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, there were 508 participants, of whom 286 were women, 209 were men, and 13 did not disclose their gender. The average age of the participants was 31. Additionally, 279 participants reported having a bachelor's degree, 210 a master's degree, and 19 a doctoral degree. The means and standard deviations of the research variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Mature	13	72	48.16	13.83	-0.193	-0.923
Neurotic	11	63	43.05	13.22	-0.092	-1.202
Immature	33	185	122.39	39.25	0.081	1.195
Hostile Attitude	8	56	26.65	13.78	0.355	1.260
Noncompliant Attitude	9	58	22.45	14.14	0.804	0.874
Positive Attitude	8	59	25.97	13.20	0.412	1.153
Seductiveness	5	20	13.02	3.08	0.782	0.015
Attention Seeking	7	23	14.42	2.87	0.614	0.480

Before evaluating the measurement model and the structural model, key assumptions of structural equation modeling, including univariate and multivariate normality and the absence of multicollinearity, were examined. The calculation of skewness and kurtosis for each observed variable is a common method for assessing univariate

normality. In this study, the skewness of the observed variables ranged from -0.193 to 0.804, and their kurtosis ranged from -1.260 to 1.153. According to Chou and Bentler (1995), a cutoff value of ± 3 for skewness and ± 10 for kurtosis is appropriate. Therefore, the normality of the research data was confirmed.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of Research Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Mature	1							
2. Immature	0.68	1						
3. Neurotic	0.69	0.79	1					
4. Hostile Attitude	0.44	0.51	0.47	1				
5. Noncompliant Attitude	0.40	0.49	0.45	0.81	1			
6. Positive Attitude	0.39	0.43	0.39	0.80	0.80	1		
7. Seductiveness	0.47	0.56	0.52	0.52	0.49	0.47	1	
8. Attention Seeking	0.51	0.53	0.52	0.48	0.45	0.45	0.79	1

All correlations are significant ($p < 0.01$)

In this study, the assumption of multivariate normality was assessed by calculating the relative multivariate kurtosis index, which was found to be 1.194. Bentler (1995) suggests that if the value of this index does not exceed 3, multivariate normality is achieved. Therefore, the distribution of all variable combinations is normal. The assumption of the absence of multicollinearity was examined by inspecting the correlation matrix among the observed variables. This inspection indicated the absence of multicollinearity among them. Correlation coefficients ranged from 0.39 to 0.81. Correlation coefficients above 0.85 can create issues in accurate model estimation (Bentler, 1995). In such cases, one of the two variables should be excluded from the analysis. Thus, the assumption of the absence of multicollinearity was also confirmed.

Structural equation modeling was employed using the maximum likelihood estimation method to evaluate the measurement model and the structural model.

The fit indices for the measurement model and the structural model in this study indicated an optimal fit. Specifically, the chi-square value was 30.12, with a ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom (X^2/DF) of 1.77. The Relative Fit Index (RFI) was 0.97, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.039, and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was 0.017. Additionally, the Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) was 0.97, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was 0.99, and the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) was also 0.99, demonstrating that the observed variables sufficiently operationalize the latent variables and the model is well-fitting.

Table 3

Results of the Bootstrapping Test for Mediation Relationships

Independent Variable	Mediator Variable	Dependent Variable	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Estimate Error	Effect Size	Significance Level
Attitude Towards Parents	Defense Mechanism	Histrionic Personality Traits	0.492	0.187	0.045	0.290	0.001

In the present study, the bootstrapping method was used to evaluate mediation relationships. Bootstrapping provides the most robust and logical method for assessing indirect effects. The significance of these relationships can be assessed in two ways: first by referring to the significance levels, and second by examining the confidence intervals. If the upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence interval for the mediating path are both positive or both negative (i.e., zero does not fall within these bounds), the path is significant at $p < .05$.

Table 3 shows the indirect or mediating effects for the hypothetical model. According to Table 3, the effect of the child's attitude towards parents on histrionic personality traits mediated by defense mechanisms has a standardized coefficient of 0.290 ($p = .001$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explain histrionic personality traits based on child attitudes towards parents and defense mechanisms. The findings indicated that histrionic personality traits are positively explained both directly and indirectly through the child's attitude towards the father and defense mechanisms. This finding aligns with the results of prior studies (Bowins, 2010; Di Giuseppe et al., 2019; Laconi et al., 2022; Siefert & Porcerelli, 2015). Individuals with histrionic personality disorder are emotionally reactive and display flamboyant, dramatic, and extroverted behaviors. However, despite their ostentatious and flamboyant behaviors, they often cannot maintain deep attachments for long periods, resulting in superficial relationships (Sadock & Sadock, 2010).

To explain this finding, it can be said that relationships with significant individuals in life are based on cognitive-emotional representations rooted in interpersonal relationships and are related to the individual's capacity to form stable relationships in dysfunctional contexts. According to object relations theory and self-psychology, a child's closest and most intimate early relationships have the most significant impact on their psychological normalcy and abnormality. This theory posits that early relational conflicts

with objects, accompanied by the prevailing mood in these relationships, become internalized and later affect the individual's relationships with new people (Gagnon et al., 2015; Khanjani et al., 2012).

Masterson suggests that the primary problem for individuals with Cluster B personality organization lies in maternal pathology, the libidinal withdrawal of the mother from the child, and the frustration of the child's separation-individuation process. While all children begin their lives with absolute dependence on caregivers, they must eventually become independent individuals. Accordingly, Masterson believes that in families of individuals with Cluster B personality organization, the mother's desire to maintain a continuous close relationship with the child challenges the child's gradual development of autonomy. The child's attempts to individuate provoke excessive anxiety in the mother, followed by caretaking behaviors from the child. When the caregiver wishes to maintain a close relationship, the child feels deep ambivalence, sometimes succumbing to the mother's oppressive clinginess and sometimes reacting with withdrawal and negative isolation. The child wants to maintain the mother's support but also desires to become an independent individual. The conflict between these two opposing desires prevents the child from integrating and synthesizing the mother's good and bad images. The result is the formation of a fear of abandonment, as the child's dependency is rewarded, and their independence is met with a lack of affection. Consequently, the child becomes trapped in intense ambivalence between assertiveness and abandonment, forming the basis for the development of high-level Cluster B personality organization, characterized by unstable relationships, feelings of emptiness, and a tendency to seek excessively close or idealized fusion relationships (Khanjani et al., 2012; Laconi et al., 2022).

Insecure attachment does not directly lead to personality damage, but the primary attachment pattern, family context, and other social experiences make a person more vulnerable than others. Mothers of individuals with insecure attachment styles exhibit highly unstable behaviors, depriving the child

of predictability. As a result, the internal model of the attachment figure constantly ignites fears and anxieties about separation, as the attachment figure does not provide a stable and secure internal base available whenever needed. In the structural theory of the mind, the ego has many functions aimed at protecting the person by mediating between internal forces and external reality expectations. These internal forces include the superego and the id, which often remain outside conscious awareness and in the realm of the unconscious (Jamil et al., 2015). Therefore, a strong ego makes individuals less likely to exhibit signs of psychological distress and provides sufficient tolerance and capacity to cope with stressful life conditions. On the other hand, ego weakness causes the organism to retreat from the external world to the internal world. One of the internal resources enabling a person to continue adaptive growth and maintain mental health despite adverse conditions and negative events is defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms reduce anxiety and increase mental health. Ego strength is a crucial variable in human functioning. The term ego strength refers to an individual's ability to effectively deal with competing demands and exhausting situations and to function effectively despite these conflicting forces' demands and expectations (Besharat et al., 2018). As noted in the literature, humans inevitably use defense mechanisms at any level of psychological development. This is because, according to psychoanalytic theory, humans are always under pressure from id impulses, which are sometimes dangerous and incompatible with cultural and social requirements. Satisfying these impulses requires ego compromise as an agent related to external reality. In the present study, the mediating role of defense mechanisms has been confirmed, indicating that child attitudes towards parents influence histrionic personality traits through defense mechanisms. To explain this finding, it should be noted that defense mechanisms serve the reality principle by compromising to satisfy id impulses, which are satisfied in a substitutive form. The more organized the ego, the more mature the defense mechanisms, and the less reality distortion occurs.

Overall, it can be said that a positive father presence can regulate an individual's relationships, enabling them to navigate a spectrum ranging from excessive separation to intimacy and fusion. What matters for an individual's mental health is the ability to maintain a healthy distance in relationships, avoiding suffocation from excessive closeness and suffering from extreme distance. A positive father presence helps express anger and recognize goals and

abilities, prerequisites for mature relationships with others, characterized by differentiation and interactive connection. Ultimately, the father helps establish the triad of psychological independence, the formation of an independent self, and separation from dependent behaviors on parents. Individuals with a negative attitude towards their father experience more anxiety in interpersonal relationships concerning being loved and accepted by others. Although establishing relationships is psychologically important for these individuals, guilt, jealousy, and anxiety lead to maladaptive and repetitive patterns such as excessive dependency, clinginess, and self-destructive behaviors in their relationships. Separation, loss, and loneliness are hard and intolerable for them, making them highly sensitive to the possibility of abandonment, constantly seeking reassurance of support and intimacy from others. Low levels of emotional involvement and disconnection from object relations draw them towards compensatory behavior, but this separation is accompanied by anger rather than maturity (Laconi et al., 2022; Romeo et al., 2022). Researchers have reported that the absence of a father, both physically and psychologically, significantly affects the self-structure formation process and the network of object relations. Bishop and Lane (2000) highlight the father's role as a power reference in the mother-child-father triad, significantly shaping the child's object relations. By creating a pull and attraction, the father introduces the child to the real world, encompassing various people, objects, and subjects (Hawk et al., 2019; Jamil et al., 2015). Thus, experiencing a satisfying union with the father, loving without conflict, and being loved by him provides the child with a lasting and deep sense of security against external threats and helps them develop a firm and stable sense of self. Accordingly, ego psychology theorists consider a loving and empathetic father a crucial source for developing a sense of self-integration (Bowins, 2010; Di Giuseppe et al., 2019). In summary, unconflicted relationships with objects in early childhood foster the development of a fragile and unstable ego. Parents with flawed parenting styles and conditional affection cause the child to feel worthy of attention only if they are perfect and flawless. These individuals are lonely children who believe they are valuable only when they bring pride to their parents, striving for their attention, ultimately leading to a chaotic personality structure manifesting as histrionic personality traits in adulthood.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Although the findings supported the hypothetical model, the results should be interpreted considering the study's limitations. Firstly, this study was conducted on schizophrenic patients, a relatively homogeneous population; therefore, there are limitations in generalizing the results to other populations. While many researchers support conceptualizing mental disorders dimensionally, believing that clinical and non-clinical environment results are largely consistent, caution is warranted in generalizing this study's findings to non-clinical settings. Another limitation is that the cross-sectional nature of the present study prevents causal inferences and precise understanding of the true nature of the relationships between the research variables. There is a high probability that the temporal order of the variables' formation is based on the proposed hypothetical model; however, alternative explanations cannot be ruled out based on this study alone. Finally, this study used only one self-report instrument to evaluate each variable. Utilizing diverse measurement methods can aid in better conceptualizing the variables. Considering these limitations, it is suggested that the present study be conducted on clinical or non-student populations to increase the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies are recommended to infer causal relationships and clarify the temporal sequence between research variables. Given that one of the limitations of this study was the use of self-report scales, it is recommended that future research employ a qualitative study based on interviews. Based on the findings, practical recommendations include focusing on the role of defense mechanisms in forming histrionic personality traits, considering the family's role and functioning, and addressing family functioning dimensions such as problem-solving, roles, emotional involvement, emotional fusion, and behavior control in shaping histrionic personality traits.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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