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The Structural Relationship of Parental Burnout and Mothers' Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness: The Mediating Role of Self-criticism

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Abstract

Abstract

Being a parent can be considered one of the most important and at the same time the most enjoyable life experiences of any individual; however, for some fathers and mothers, this role is associated with increasing challenges and can become a source of daily or chronic tensions and ultimately burnout. Therefore, the present study investigated the mediating role of self-criticism in the relationship between mothers' early memories of warmth and safeness and their experiences of parental burnout. This research is a descriptive cross-sectional study based on structural equation modeling which studied a sample of mothers in Isfahan (i.e., 319 mothers). The statistical population included mothers who had preschool children in the academic year of 2020-2021, and the data was collected virtually based on available sampling method. The research instruments included the Parental Burnout Assessment (Roskam et al., 2018), Forms of Criticism/Self-Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale (Gilbert et al., 2004), and Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness scale (Richter et al., 2009). The results showed that the causal model of the relationship between mothers' early memories of warmth and safeness, self-criticism, and the experience of parental burnout had a good fitness (CMIN / DF= 2.91, GFI = 0.97, CFI = 0.97, IFI = 0.97, NFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.067). Early memories of warmth and safeness had a direct and significant effect on self-criticism (β = -0.39, P < 0.001). Self-criticism also had a direct and significant effect on mothers' parental burnout (β = 0.75, P < 0.001). However, mothers' early memories of warmth and safeness did not have a direct effect on parental burnout. Moreover, the findings showed that mothers' early memories of warmth and safeness with the mediation of self-criticism had an indirect effect on parental burnout, and this model could explain nearly 54% of the variance of parental burnout (P < 0.001).

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Introduction

Research studies on parenting in the last few decades have shown that parents, regardless of their socio-cultural background and mental health, experience difficulties in their parenting experiences that may put them at risk of a certain type of burnout (i.e., parental burnout) (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018). By definition, parental burnout is a unique and context-oriented syndrome which occurs as a result of constant and chronic exposure to parenting stress. It has dangerous consequences such as increasing the likelihood of addiction, health impairment, conflict between couples, escape and suicidal thoughts, and the risk of parental violence and abuse towards children (Mikolajczak et al., 2018; Mikolajczak et al., 2019; Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2020). Regarding the causes of parental burnout, different individual and social underlying factors have been mentioned (e.g., Lindström et al., 2011; Sorkkila & Aunola, 2019). However, recent research studies on job burnout show that at least in professional environments, the degree of self-criticism is considered a predictor and main cause of burnout (Finan et al., 2022; Fung et al., 2022). This issue also questions the role of self-criticism in predicting parental burnout.

While supporting the negative effects of self-criticism on parenting (e.g., Puyané et al., 2022; Vliegen et al., 2010), the literature confirms the assumption about the effect of parents' self-criticism on their parental burnout. On the other hand, referring to the mediating role of self-criticism in the relationship between childhood maltreatment and adulthood emotional relationships (Lassri & Shahar, 2012; Özdemir & Sağkal, 2019; Pinto-Gouveia et al., 2013) and confirming the negative effects of self-criticism on interpersonal relationships (Barcaccia et al., 2020; Luoma & Chwyl, 2020), the literature suggests that self-criticism may act as a mediating variable and connects parents' childhood memories to their parental experiences.

However, parental burnout, as a very new field, has not seriously considered the direct impact of memories of childhood on parental burnout. However, the possibility of such a relationship based on research results related to the impact of these memories on other types of burnouts such as burnout in marriage or job burnout (Pines, 2004; Reizer, 2015; Ronen & Mikulincer, 2009) would not seem far from reality. All in all, we intended to talk about a conceptual model in which an adult's memories of the warmth and safeness of his parents affect his experience of parental exhaustion through self-criticism.

Methodology

The statistical population included all mothers in Isfahan who had preschool children in the academic year of 2019-2020. However, due to the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the process of collecting data was done virtually through available sampling method. More specifically, the link to the questionnaires of this research study was sent to the virtual groups formed for mothers in three preschool centers in Isfahan, and they were invited to participate in the study by answering the questions in the link. Finally, after 20 days, all 319 mothers who participated in this research study and were not included in the exclusion criteria were considered as the research sample. According to the exclusion criteria, divorced or widowed mothers as well as mothers who had a child with a physical disability or a special psycho-mental problem were excluded from this study. However, the sample size of the present study met the minimum required value of Kline (2015) for the structural equation test (i.e., at least 200 individuals, or ten to twenty times more than the parameters in the model). To collect data, Parental Burnout Assessment (Roskam et al., 2018), Forms of Criticism/Self-Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale (Gilbert et al., 2004), and Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale (Richter et al., 2009) were used. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software (version 22) and AMOS software (version 22).

Results

Descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix of the research variables for the mothers who participated in the current research are reported in Table 1. In this table, to check the univariate normality, the values of the skewness and kurtosis indices and their agreement with Kline's (2015) suggestion were considered (the absolute value of skewness was equal to 3, and the absolute value of kurtosis was equal to 10).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix of the research variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Early memories of warmth and safeness	1						
2. Lack of reassure self	-0.41**	1					
3. Inadequate self and hated self	-.26**	.47**	1				
4. Exhaustion in one's parental role	-.19**	.30**	.51**	1			
5. Feelings of being fed up with one's parental role	-.20**	.33**	.40**	.69**	1		
6. Contrast with previous parental self	-.21**	.36**	.57**	.68**	.67**	1	
7. Emotional distancing from one's children	-.16**	.29**	.30**	.39**	.42**	.48**	1
Mean	57.34	11.85	22.95	12.03	2.91	5.83	2.23
Std. deviation	18.13	4.89	9.78	12.74	5.69	7.54	3.19
Range	84-4	29-2	52-0	54-0	30-0	30-0	12-0
Skewedness	-.67	.67	-.29	1.36	2.23	1.63	1.62
kurtosis	-.17	.13	-.63	1.24	2.26	1.34	1.56

After making sure that the statistical assumptions were met, the proposed research model was examined using the structural equation modeling method. In this model, the variable of early memories of warmth and safeness was considered as exogenous variables; parental burnout was considered as an endogenous variable, and self-criticism was considered as the mediating variable of the model. The final research model is presented in Figure 1.

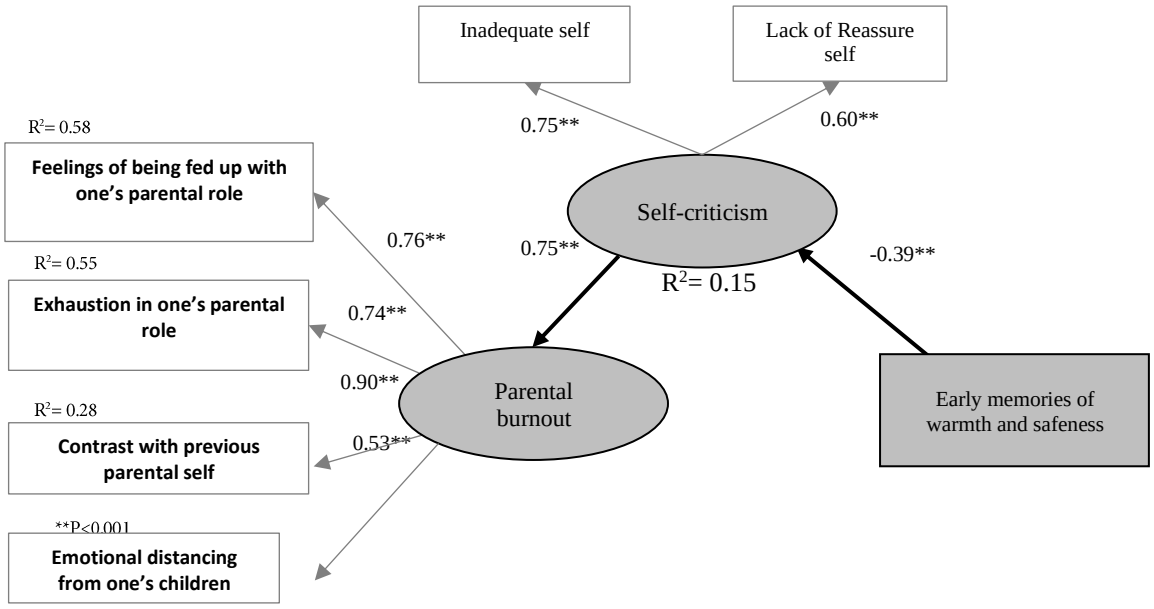


Figure 1. The final model of the current research study

Furthermore, the fit indices reported in Table 2 showed that the final research model had a good fit.

Table 2. Fit indices of the final model of the current research study

Indices	CMIN/DF	CFI	IFI	NFI	GFI	AGFI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
Value	2.97	.96	.95	.96	.97	.92	.064	.0499
Acceptable value	<3	> .95	> .95	> .95	> .95	> .95	> .07	≥ .05

Conclusion

The findings of this study are in line with the literature (e.g., Lassri & Shahar, 2012; Özdemir & Sağkal, 2019; Pinto-Gouveia et al., 2013) which supported the direct effect of mothers' memories of warmth and safeness on self-criticism. This finding is confirmed by experts such as Gilbert et al. (2004) or Pinto-Gouveia et al. (2013) who studied the relationship between childhood and self-criticism in adulthood through the lens of attachment relationships. The indirect effect of these memories is also supported in the literature (e.g., Barcaccia et al., 2020; Campos et al., 2012; Cheng & Furnham, 2004; Luoma & Chwyl, 2020; Özdemir & Sağkal, 2019; Pinto-Gouveia et al., 2013). They suggested that self-criticism is the main mediator in the relationship between childhood memories and mental health and interpersonal relationships in adulthood. It is expected that this model would lead to a better understanding of Iranian mothers' experiences of parental burnout.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in this article.

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