



RESEARCH PAPER**Perceived Emotional Neglect, Interpersonal Difficulties, and Self-Efficacy in Adolescents**

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between emotional neglect, interpersonal difficulties, and self-efficacy among adolescents, with a particular focus on examining the mediating role of interpersonal difficulties. A sample of 300 adolescents was selected using a convenient sampling technique. The data were analyzed using correlation, regression and mediation analyses through the PROCESS macro in SPSS. The finding revealed that emotional neglect was significantly positively associated with interpersonal difficulties and significantly negatively associated with self-efficacy. Furthermore, emotional neglect significantly predicted both interpersonal difficulties and self-efficacy, indicating its strong influence on adolescents social and psychological well-being. However, mediation analyses demonstrated that interpersonal difficulties did not significantly mediate the relationship between emotional neglect and self-efficacy, the indirect effect was non-significant.

KEYWORDS Emotional Neglect, Interpersonal Difficulties, Self-Efficacy, Adolescents

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of great change in the biological, cognitive, emotional and social domains. Identity development, emotion management, and interpersonal development are all a part of the transition to the adult years and have an effect on that transition. The quality of early experiences of caregiving, namely adolescents' psychological adjustment and social competence, significantly influences these developmental outcomes (John Bowlby, 1969).

Emotional neglect is one of the subtler types of adverse childhood events and not a type of maltreatment that is generally identified. Emotional neglect occurs when a parent or carer deprives a child of the emotional support, warmth, affection or responsiveness required to maintain a child's emotional needs over a period of time. Emotional neglect is distinct from other types of neglect, in that it lacks key emotional interactions, and can be far-reaching and have an effect on psychological and relationship development (Briere & Scott, 2015).

Adolescent interpersonal relationship problems may be more likely to occur when they feel neglected emotionally. Such relationship issues may manifest as communication challenges, mistrust, social isolation, and relationship issues. Early disruption in the child's

attachment that is caused by inconsistent and inadequate parenting can cause insecure attachment during the childhood and adolescence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Emotional neglect has also been shown to have a negative effect on interpersonal functioning and there is a close association with low self-efficacy. When it comes to motivation, resilience and mental health, self-efficacy or a person's belief in what they can do to successfully complete tasks and solve problems is significant. The social cognitive theory suggests that high level beliefs are built out of self-efficacy beliefs that need to be supported and validated (Albert Bandura, 1997). Without emotional support and encouragement, teens can begin to think that they're not good enough and become less confident of their skills.

Moreover, the interaction of emotional neglect, inter-personal difficulties and self-efficacy can be a significant area of study especially in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. In many collectivist societies including Pakistan, there is less space for emotional expression and may be a parenting style in which an emphasis is laid on discipline and obedience rather than responsiveness to emotions. This culture can turn emotional neglect into a normalisation and thus make it more prevalent and impactful for the psychological well-being of adolescents.

Literature Review

Emotional neglect is a form of child maltreatment that happens when adults are not available for emotional support, warmth, affection or attention to the child's emotional needs over a long time. Emotional neglect is more subtle than physical abuse – it happens when there are missing crucial emotional exchanges and can seriously impact psychological growth. It involves a caregiving situation where a child's emotional expression is not engaged, not validated or is not responded to adequately (Briere & Scott, 2015).

Interpersonal difficulties refer to persistent problems in initiating, maintaining, and regulating social relationships. These difficulties may manifest in various forms, including ineffective communication, lack of trust, social withdrawal, heightened sensitivity to rejection, and challenges in expressing emotions appropriately. Interpersonal functioning is a critical aspect of adolescent development, as this stage involves increased reliance on peer relationships and social interactions for emotional support, identity formation, and psychological adjustment (Buhrmester, 1990).

Parent-child relationships are the first social relationships. Emotionally absent parents may not teach healthy communication, emotion regulation, empathy, and trust. As a result, they may come into peer relationships with fear, insecurity, dependency, hostility, or avoidance. Attachment theory suggests that early neglected or inconsistent parenting may lead to insecure internal working models that affect subsequent expectations and interpersonal behaviors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Impairments in interpersonal relationships are linked with loneliness, anxiety, depressive symptoms, adjustment problems, low self-esteem and lack of social support. Young people who have repeated difficulties with misunderstanding, rejection or conflict in their relationships may withdraw from others and experience emotional distress. Negative interpersonal experiences can also reduce feelings of self-worth and perpetuate withdrawal (Segrin & Flora, 2000). Self-efficacy, introduced by Albert Bandura (1977), refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform tasks and manage difficult situations. It influences motivation, persistence, emotional regulation, and

achievement. Adolescents with high self-efficacy tend to approach challenges confidently, recover from setbacks, and engage in effective coping. Those with low self-efficacy are more likely to avoid challenges, doubt themselves, and give up easily (Bandura, 1997).

A growing body of literature suggests that early emotional experiences play a foundational role in shaping both interpersonal functioning and self-related beliefs. Emotional neglect, characterized by the absence of emotional support and responsiveness from caregivers, has been consistently linked with disruptions in attachment security and relational functioning (John Bowlby, 1969). These disruptions often manifest in adolescence as interpersonal difficulties, including problems in trust, communication, and emotional expression.

At the same time, self-efficacy is largely developed through social interactions and feedback processes, where individuals gain confidence through supportive relationships, encouragement, and successful interpersonal experiences. According to social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is influenced not only by direct mastery experiences but also by social persuasion and interpersonal validation (Albert Bandura, 1997).

Hypotheses

- H₁ Perceived emotional neglect will be significantly positively associated with interpersonal difficulties among adolescents.
- H₂ Perceived emotional neglect will be significantly negatively associated with self-efficacy among adolescents.
- H₃ Interpersonal difficulties will be negatively associated with self-efficacy among adolescents.
- H₄ Perceived emotional neglect will significantly predict interpersonal difficulties among adolescents.
- H₅ Perceived emotional neglect will significantly predict self-efficacy among adolescents.
- H₆ Interpersonal difficulties will mediate the relationship between perceived emotional neglect and self-efficacy among adolescents..

Material and Methods

Research Design

The current research study used a correlational research design that is cross-sectional. This was deemed to be suitable in that it allows the researchers to test the relationship of variables at once without the need of controlling variables. It comes in especially handy when determining how much and which way to go with associations between the psychological variables of emotional neglect, interpersonal difficulties, and self-efficacy.

Participants

The present study sample was made up of 300 adolescents both boys and girls. The sample was picked in various schools and colleges of Faisalabad. Participants were aged 13-19 years (between early and late adolescence). The inclusion of both female (64%) and

male (36%) participants offered a wider coverage of the adolescents and greater extrapolation of results.

Inclusion Criteria

- Young people aged 13-19 years.
- Students who study in schools or college of Faisalabad. Both males and females.
- Those who could read the questions in Urdu or English questionnaires.
- Participants who will give informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Participants who fell outside the specified age range were excluded from the research during the selection process.
- A lack of proficiency in the language of the questionnaire resulted in the exclusion of these participants from the study.
- This research did not include participants from areas beyond the geographical focus of the study.

Research Procedure

Data collection was preceded by seeking the consent of concerned institutions of learning. The respondents were contacted in other Faisalabad schools and colleges and provided with the objective of the research.

The researcher stated that the survey was voluntary and the answers would be kept confidential. Participants were informed and given consent to participate in the study prior to receiving questionnaires. They were provided with the questionnaire booklet that comprised demographic data and scales of the study. Precise information was given about the manner in which to fill in the forms. Respondents were presented with the questionnaires in a quiet classroom setting and the filled forms were received at once the questionnaires were filled.

Statistical Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics were used to analyze the data. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated to describe demographic variables and measures of the study. The hypotheses of the study were tested by inferential statistics. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to analyses the relationships between the perceived emotional neglect, interpersonal difficulties and self-efficacy.

Regression analysis was performed to find the predictive value of the variables of the study. To test the mediating effect of interpersonal problems in the relationships between perceived emotional neglect and self-efficacy AFH created a mediation-analysis model, which is PROCESS Macro, Model 4. Indirect effects were estimated by use of bootstrapping procedures.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants (N=300)

Variable	categories	Frequency	%
	13 years	7	2.3 %

Age in years	14 years	24	8.0 %
	15 years	45	15.0 %
	16 years	58	19.3 %
	17 years	95	31.7 %
	18 years	59	19.7 %
	19 years	12	4.0 %
Gender	Male	108	36 %
	Female	192	64 %
Birth order	First born	73	24.3 %
	Second born	125	43%
	Last born	73	24.3 %
	Only child	25	8.3 %
Class level	Matric	99	33 %
	Intermediate	201	67 %
Employment status	Both parents employed	58	19.3 %
	One parent employed	215	71.7 %
	Neither	27	9.0 %
Family structure	Nuclear	147	49%
	Joint	153	51 %

This results presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The age distribution indicated that the majority of participants were 17 years old (31.7%), followed by 18 years (19.7%) and 16 years (19.3%). A smaller proportion of participants were aged 13 years (2.3%) and 19 years (4.0%).

Regarding gender, 36% of the participants were male and 64% were female. In terms of birth order, most participants were second-born (43%), followed by first-born and last-born adolescents (24.3% each), while only 8.3% were only children. With respect to class level, 33% of the participants were in matric, whereas 67% were in intermediate. In terms of parental employment status, the majority of participants (71.7%) reported that one parent was employed, while 19.3% reported that both parents were employed and 9% reported that neither parent was employed. Furthermore, 49% of the participants belonged to nuclear families, whereas 51% belonged to joint family system.

Table 2
Psychometric properties of scales (N=300)

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
EN	300	6.00	93.00	32.7	22.3	.87
ID	300	72.00	260.00	161.3	31.3	.88
SE	300	32.00	100.00	67.14	13.1	.78

Note: EN= Emotional Neglect, ID= Interpersonal Difficulties & SE= Self-Efficacy

This result presents the psychometric properties of the study variables. The results indicated that perceived emotional neglect had a mean score of 32.7 (SD = 22.3), with scores ranging from 6 to 93. The Interpersonal Difficulties Scale showed a mean score of 161.3 (SD = 31.3), with a minimum score of 72 and a maximum score of 260. Similarly, self-efficacy had a mean score of 67.14 (SD = 13.1), with scores ranging from 32 to 100.

Furthermore, the reliability analysis demonstrated that all scales had good internal consistency. The perceived emotional neglect scale showed a Cronbach's alpha of .872, the interpersonal difficulties scale showed an alpha of .886, and the self-efficacy scale demonstrated an alpha of .781. Overall, these findings indicate that the scales used in the present study are reliable measures.

Table 3
Correlation Analyses between Emotional Neglect, Interpersonal Difficulties and Self-Efficacy

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
EN	1									
EN-N	.76**	1								
EN-CN	.83**	.55**	1							
EN-SN	.87**	.54**	.63**	1						
EN-P	.81**	.46**	.52**	.65**	1					
ID	.27**	.18**	.25**	.26**	.20**	1				
SE	-.25**	-.33**	-.22**	-.15**	-.14*	-.07	1			
S-SE	-.16**	-.19**	-.18**	-.09	-.16	-.09	.75**	1		
A-SE	-.27**	-.38**	-.21**	-.15**	-.17**	-.08	.73**	.36**	1	
E-SE	-.14**	-.19**	-.11	-.10	-.09	.008	.78**	.37**	.34**	1

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) **. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) *

Note: EN (emotional neglect), EN-N (emotional needs neglect), EN-CN (cognitive neglect needs), EN-SN (supervisory needs neglect), EN-P (physical needs neglect), ID (interpersonal difficulties), SE (self-efficacy), S-SE (social self-efficacy), A-SE (academic self-efficacy) & E-SE (emotional self-efficacy).

Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among perceived emotional neglect, interpersonal difficulties, and self-efficacy. The results indicated that perceived emotional neglect was significantly positively correlated with interpersonal difficulties ($r = .27, p < .01$), suggesting that higher levels of emotional neglect are associated with greater interpersonal difficulties among adolescents.

Furthermore, perceived emotional neglect was found to be significantly negatively correlated with overall self-efficacy ($r = -.25, p < .01$), indicating that higher emotional neglect is associated with lower self-efficacy. Similar patterns were observed across the subscales of self-efficacy, including social, academic, and emotional self-efficacy, with most correlations being negative and statistically significant.

However, the relationship between interpersonal difficulties and overall self-efficacy was found to be weak and non-significant ($r = -.07, p > .05$), indicating that interpersonal difficulties are not significantly associated with self-efficacy in the present study. This finding contradicts earlier assumptions and suggests that interpersonal difficulties may not directly influence self-efficacy

Table 4
Linear regression analysis, Perceived Emotional Neglect as a Predictor of Interpersonal Difficulties

Predictor	B	SE B	β	P
Constant	148.90	3.10	—	< .001
EN	0.38	0.08	0.27	< .001

$R = .27, R^2 = .07, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .07, F(1, 298) = 23.74, p < .001$

Note: EN (Emotional Neglect) Independent Variable, Interpersonal Difficulties Dependent Variable.

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether perceived emotional neglect significantly predicts interpersonal difficulties among adolescents. The results indicated that perceived emotional neglect was a significant positive predictor of

interpersonal difficulties ($\beta = .27, p < .001$). This suggests that higher levels of emotional neglect are associated with increased interpersonal difficulties.

The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 298) = 23.74, p < .001$, explaining approximately 7% of the variance in interpersonal difficulties ($R^2 = .07$).

Table 5
Linear regression analysis, Perceived Emotional Neglect predicting self-efficacy

Predictor	B	SE B	β	P
Constant	71.95	1.31	–	< .001
EN	-0.15	0.03	-0.25	< .001

$R = .25, R^2 = .06, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .06, F(1, 298) = 19.80, p < .001$ *Note:* EN (Emotional Neglect)

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether perceived emotional neglect significantly predicts self-efficacy among adolescents. The results indicated that perceived emotional neglect was a significant negative predictor of self-efficacy ($\beta = -.25, p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of emotional neglect are associated with lower self-efficacy.

The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 298) = 19.80, p < .001$, explaining approximately 6% of the variance in self-efficacy ($R^2 = .06$).

Table 6
Gender Differences in Perceived Emotional Neglect, Interpersonal Difficulties, and Self-Efficacy

variables	Female (n=192)		Male (n=108)		t	P	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
EN	25.45	14.91	45.65	27.02	7.17	<.001	.60
ID	163.65	32.20	157.12	29.28	-1.74	.083	.10
SE	65.33	12.30	70.37	13.93	3.13	.002	.22

Note: EN (Emotional neglect), ID (Interpersonal Difficulties), SE (self-efficacy)

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in perceived emotional neglect, interpersonal difficulties, and self-efficacy among adolescents.

The results indicated that males reported significantly higher levels of perceived emotional neglect compared to females, $t(298) = 7.17, p < .001$. However, no significant gender differences were found in interpersonal difficulties, $t(298) = -1.74, p > .05$.

In contrast, a significant difference was observed in self-efficacy, with males reporting higher self-efficacy than females, $t(298) = 3.13, p < .01$. The effect size for self-efficacy was small ($d = 0.22$), indicating a modest difference between males and females.

Table 7
Interpersonal Difficulties as a Mediator between Emotional Neglect and Self-Efficacy among Adolescents

Total Effect						
Variables	Effect (b)	p	Boot SE	BootLL	BootUL	
Emotional Neglect → Self-Efficacy	-0.1462	< .001	0.0343	-0.2138	-0.0786	
Direct Effect						
Variables	Effect (b)	p	Boot SE	BootLL	BootUL	
Emotional Neglect → Self-Efficacy	-0.1462	< .001	0.0343	-0.2138	-0.0786	

Emotional Neglect → Interpersonal Difficulties	0.3815	< .001	0.0783	0.5356	0.2275
Interpersonal Difficulties → Self-Efficacy	-0.0016	.949	0.0244	-0.0497	0.0466
Indirect Effect					
Mediator	Effect	Boot SE	BootLL	BootUL	
Interpersonal Difficulties	-0.0006	0.0116	-0.0245	0.0211	

Note. Boot SE = Bootstrap Standard Error; BootLL = Lower Limit of Confidence Interval; BootUL = Upper Limit of Confidence Interval. Confidence intervals are based on 5000 bootstrap samples.

Mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 4 to examine the mediating role of interpersonal difficulties in the relationship between perceived emotional neglect and self-efficacy.

The results indicated that the total effect of perceived emotional neglect on self-efficacy was statistically significant ($b = -0.1462$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of emotional neglect are associated with lower self-efficacy.

The direct effect of emotional neglect on self-efficacy also remained significant ($b = -0.1462$, $p < .001$), suggesting that emotional neglect directly predicts self-efficacy even after including interpersonal difficulties in the model.

However, interpersonal difficulties were not a significant predictor of self-efficacy ($b = -0.0016$, $p = .949$). Furthermore, the indirect effect of emotional neglect on self-efficacy through interpersonal difficulties was non-significant ($b = -0.0006$), as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval included zero (LL = -0.0245 , UL = 0.0211).

Therefore, interpersonal difficulties did not significantly mediate the relationship between perceived emotional neglect and self-efficacy.

Discussion

The present study aimed at exploring the relationship between perceived emotional neglect and the interpersonal problem, self-efficacy in adolescents of Faisalabad, Pakistan. The study also explored whether or not interpersonal difficulties mediated between perceived emotional neglect and self-efficacy. Emotional neglect is an ongoing adverse childhood event which is connected to the negative psychological and social impacts of the adolescent period (Norman et al., 2012). Similarly, self-efficacy plays an important role in adolescents' motivation, in emotional regulation and functioning (Albert Bandura, 1997).

A cross sectional correlational research design was used. The population consisted of 300 adolescents (males and females) from different schools and colleges selected by convenience sampling technique aged 13-19 years. Emotional neglect and interpersonal problems and self-efficacy were assessed with standardized self-report scales. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation and regression analysis as well as mediation analysis in PROCESS Macro Model 4 (Andrew F. Hayes, 2013) with IBM SPSS software.

Interpersonal difficulties was significantly positively correlated with emotional neglect; self-efficacy was significantly negatively correlated with emotional neglect. The results were congruent with some earlier research suggesting that an emotionally neglectful environment can result in difficulties in interpersonal functioning and in self-belief (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Further, perceived emotional neglect was found to be a strong predictor of adolescents' interpersonal problems and self-efficacy. But the

association between interpersonal difficulties and self-efficacy was found to be weak (and statistically insignificant).

Interpersonal difficulties accounted for the mediation analysis between perceived emotional neglect and self-efficacy, which was not significant. This discovery implies that emotional neglect could directly impact on the self-efficacy of adolescents, and not through interpersonal problems. Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of addressing emotional neglect for enhancing adolescent's psychological well-being, positive relationships and self-confidence.

Conclusion

The present study aims at exploring the interrelationships of perceived emotional neglect, interpersonal difficulties and self-efficacy among adolescent population in the context of Pakistan. The results provide important theoretical and practical implications for the ways in which early emotional experiences can impact social functioning and psychological development in adolescence. The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that perceived emotional neglect is a major psychological risk factor and it is related to higher interpersonal difficulties and lower self-efficacy among adolescents. Adolescents who don't feel emotionally supported, validated, or responsive from caregivers are at a greater risk of establishing unhealthy relationships, such as with a lack of trust, communication, or emotional expression. The findings validate attachment related theories such as Bowlby's (1969) theory that an emotionally unresponsive parent-child relationship is correlated with insecure attachment and interpersonal difficulties. Perceived emotional neglect was also found to significantly predict lower levels of self-efficacy, besides being associated with interpersonal functioning. This suggests emotional neglect can affect adolescents' confidence in their abilities through limiting their chances of being encouraged or emotionally supported, and of being positively reinforced. According to social cognitive theory proposed by Albert Bandura (1997), supportive experiences and feedback and mastery opportunities can be used to build self-efficacy. Without these things, adolescents may feel inadequate and lack confidence in themselves, in their school environment, in social and emotional situations and elsewhere.

Recommendations

The findings from the current study can provide some recommendations to minimize problems of perceived emotional neglect and its impact on adolescents interpersonal functioning and self-efficacy. Parent/caregiver awareness of the significance of emotional responsiveness for children would be important. Children's need for emotional care may be overlooked by many caregivers, who have taken over their physical and educational care. Therefore, it is advisable to emphasize the significance of emotional support, validation and communication to support and facilitate a healthy psychological development in adolescents in parenting programmes and awareness campaigns.

Moreover, schools can make a significant contribution in mitigating the impact of emotional neglect. Schools and colleges need to introduce mental health awareness programmes and counselling into their curriculum to enable adolescents to become aware of their interpersonal issues and low self-efficacy, and to manage them. School Psychologists and counselors can plan for an intervention program that can be effective in addressing students' communication skills and emotional expression and confidence building. These types of programs can help teens develop healthy relationships and self-confidence.

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