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If I value myself, I value school: The protective effect of self-esteem among abused females

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Abstract

Children who have been severely maltreated tend to perform significantly below their non-maltreated peers in standardized tests, earn lower grades and have the most discipline issues in the school setting. There is evidence that self-esteem (SE) may be a protective factor for youth with regard to negative emotional outcomes. The role of self-esteem needs to be explored further in more collectivistic cultures. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between physical abuse, SE and school attitudes. Participants included 14 females rescued from a city landfill in Nicaragua (ages 7–17 years, $M=12.44$), half of whom had reported being beaten. SE and attitude toward school (ATS) were assessed using the Spanish Behavior Assessment System for Children. Grade point average (GPA) was obtained from their schools. Females who were beaten had significantly lower SE and a more negative ATS. Their GPA was lower, but not significantly. When SE and abuse were considered together, the effect of abuse on school attitudes was non-significant, suggesting that SE is a protective factor for the effects of abuse on ATS.

Keywords: child maltreatment; collectivistic cultures; females; physical abuse; school attitude; self-esteem.

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Introduction

In the USA alone, more than 3.6 million children suffered maltreatment in 2009, with approximately 18% suffering physical abuse (PA) (1). An extensive body of literature supports the indication that child maltreatment has a negative impact on important outcomes in a child's life (2–4). However, the relationships between specific types of maltreatment, domains affected, cross-cultural settings, developmental stages, and degrees of impairment need to be explored further (3, 5, 6).

In collectivistic cultures, such as Mexico, PA or corporal punishment is viewed as a necessity; it is perceived to be a positive practice in order to produce good citizens (6). In a cross-sectional study in Leon, Nicaragua, nearly half of the participants reported that their children witnessed PA on a daily basis (7). Two independent studies in Nicaragua reported that children who witnessed PA were six times more likely to die by the age of 5 years (8, 9). The regions of Latin America and the Caribbean have the highest rates in the world for PA and violence against children (10).

Vulnerability to physical abuse

Research has been unable to identify a clear profile of the types of children who are at risk of PA (11–14). Historically, young age is a strong predictor of physical abuse (15). Current statistics also show that victimization is distributed between the genders, with females accounting for 51.5% of PA (1, 3). Although PA is present in a broad range of families, it is more prominent in families where the risks outnumber protective factors (5, 14). Child maltreatment, specifically PA, is strongly associated with poverty and with children from minority groups (3).

School functioning of physically abused children

Experts on crisis prevention for youth suggest that the school environment is sometimes the only avenue for troubled children to build positive relationships and self-esteem (16–19). Children who suffer PA, however, might be a challenge for the staff as well as their peers. Cognitively, children who suffer PA present with significantly higher rates of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)-like symptoms, ranging from 14%–46% when compared to the general population rates of 3%–7% (20). When compared to other maltreatment groups, PA children also had more grade repetition and higher attrition rates (21).

Emotionally, both internalized and externalized clusters of characteristics may differentiate PA children from neglected and non-maltreated children (2, 14, 22). Specifically, Pollak

and Tolley-Schell (23) found that PA children might have difficulty in controlling attention when processing threatening interpersonal signals. These results suggest that PA children might display significantly higher behavioral issues related to emotional self-regulation in a social context when compared with non-PA children. PA children also score significantly worse than other maltreatment groups on socio-emotional development (problem behaviors, self-esteem, aggression, adaptive functioning and conduct behaviors) (14). Behaviorally, children who suffer PA are more than twice as likely to suffer from learning, emotional and behavioral problems (7). In general, PA children had more discipline referrals and suspensions when compared to other maltreatment groups (14). Inconsistent with prevalence in the general population, girls who experience PA have more externalizing or disruptive behaviors, aggression and conduct disorder diagnoses than PA boys (3).

Self-esteem and childhood abuse

Physically abused children exhibited significantly lower levels of self-esteem when compared to non-abused children or children suffering other types of maltreatment (24–27). Research suggests that individuals who have suffered PA as children show lower levels of self-esteem and social competence, even when controlling for socioeconomic status and ethnicity (28). One of the mediating variables in childhood PA could be the child's self-esteem. In general, self-esteem is another factor that has been implicated in positive outcomes within a person's life (29). There is evidence that self-esteem may be a protective factor for homeless youths, with regard to negative emotional outcomes, such as loneliness (30). According to Trzesniewski, Donnellan and Robins (29), self-esteem has demonstrated stability across time similar to that of personality traits. Others argue that self-esteem is a trait-like quality that is heavily influenced by the environment. Conley (31) argued that self-esteem 'cannot be considered a stable individual-differences construct' because it lacks long-term stability (p. 21).

Regardless of your position on state vs. trait views of self-esteem, this discussion raises the question: Does self-esteem matter when surviving PA? To our knowledge no study has examined the role of self-esteem as a protective factor in physically abused children and their school attitudes. It would be of interest to determine whether higher levels of self-esteem can mediate the effects of PA in school-age children.

Methods

Participants in this study were a convenience sample, including 16 Nicaraguan girls who had been rescued from a life living and working on a landfill. Girls in this garbage-scavenging community are often neglected, beaten and forced to work. Locals report that girls as young as 9 years old may be expected to find a man to live with or sell their bodies to the garbage truck drivers so that their family can have first pick of the garbage. This special sample of girls is the focus of a long-term study aimed at identifying the factors that help them

thrive in their new environment, despite the risks and vulnerabilities from their past. The girls ranged in age from 7 to 17 years old, with a mean age of 12.44 (standard deviation, SD, 2.90). There were nine girls that reported being beaten (age $M=12.33$, SD 3.32), and seven that did not (age $M=12.57$, SD 2.51). Two of the girls who reported being beaten could not be included in the analysis, however, because of missing items on the Spanish Behavior Assessment System for Children, 2nd edition (BASC-2).

Measures

Self-esteem and school attitudes Self-esteem and attitude to school were measured with the self-esteem and attitude to school subscales of the Self-Report of Personality (SRP) forms of the BASC-2 (32). Participants who were age 6–11 were given the SRP form for children, and participants age 12–21 were given the SRP for adolescents. The reliability and validity of the BASC-2 have been established and are reported in the manual for the BASC-2 (32). Of note, the attitude to school subscale correlated with various scales of the Achenbach System of Empirically-Based Assessment (ASEBA) Youth Self-Report, especially externalizing problems ($r=0.64$) and total problems ($r=0.56$). The self-esteem subscale correlated negatively with the ASEBA Youth Self-Report, especially total problems ($r=-0.75$). For the Spanish version of the BASC-2, the manual reports coefficient α reliabilities of 0.70 (children) and 0.79 (adolescents) for the attitude to school subscale. It reports coefficient α reliabilities of 0.63 (children) and 0.61 (adolescents) for the self-esteem subscale.

The BASC-2 SRP for children has 139 items, including true-false (T/F) items and four-point frequency items (never, sometimes, often, and almost always). The attitude to school subscale includes three T/F items and four frequency items. The self-esteem subscale includes five T/F items and three frequency items. The BASC-2 SRP form for adolescents contains 176 items. On this form, the attitude to school scale includes two T/F items and five frequency items. The self-esteem subscale includes four T/F items and four frequency items. Participants were given the full BASC-2 SRP forms for their age group, and the subscales of attitude to school and self-esteem were used in analyses.

Abuse General well-being was measured with categorical questions (asking whether they have enough to eat, etc.), using a questionnaire developed by Young Lives (Child Questionnaire) (33) in Spanish. Among the questions on the well-being questionnaire was an item asking 'What makes you sad?' The options to choose from were 'being beaten', 'parents fighting', 'an ugly place', 'nothing', and 'other'. Girls who selected 'being beaten' were put in the 'Abused' category, and those who did not were put in the 'Not reported' category.

This method seemed to work better than directly asking girls whether they had been abused, since participants appear to be more comfortable answering honestly. In other attempts, the direct question resulted in participants answering 'no', when we knew from interviews that the answer was truly 'yes'. The indirect question aligned more accurately with the interview reports from staff who knew the girls' histories.

Procedures

The research team worked in partnership with a non-profit organization that has built a facility to house girls who had been living in a community on a city landfill. The team built relationships with the staff and the girls in order to establish trust. Then the questionnaires (described above) were given to the girls, with researchers and

interpreters present to answer any questions. The girls answered the questions at their own pace with paper and pencil. Grades were obtained from school records. BASC-2 scores were generated using the BASC-2 ASSIST software (Pearson, San Antonio, TX, USA), then entered and analyzed in SPSS.

The Institutional Review Board of George Fox University approved this research project. This study followed the American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines to protect the confidentiality of participants' records. The instructions for the questionnaires confirmed that consent to participate was voluntary and that participants could discontinue at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from the directors of the rescue facility, who were acting as guardians of the participants. Only aggregate data are reported.

Results

Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1. Univariate analyses of variance indicated that those who reported abuse had significantly lower self-esteem ($M=10.0$, $SD=4.04$) than those who did not [$M=14.86$, $SD=2.19$; $F(1, 13)=7.81$, $p=0.016$]. The girls who reported abuse also had more negative attitudes to school ($M=6.43$, $SD=2.8$) than the girls who did not [$M=2.43$, $SD=1.72$; $F(1, 13)=10.27$, $p=0.008$]. Figure 1 illustrates the differences in self-esteem and school attitudes by abuse category. There was no significant difference in grades between the two groups. This suggests that a history of abuse contributes to emotional difficulty in school. For this group, however, that emotional difficulty does not transfer to grades. Self-esteem and negative school attitude were correlated ($r=-0.46$), however, this was not significant ($p=0.11$) in this small sample size.

An analysis of covariance (see Table 2) was used to test whether self-esteem significantly predicted participants' attitudes to school, regardless of abuse category. With self-esteem and abuse history considered together, the effect of reported abuse on school attitudes became non-significant [$F(1, 13)=1.74$, $p=0.214$], however, partial eta squared (0.14) suggests that it still accounts for 14% of the variance in school attitude. The effect of self-esteem was significant [$F(1, 13)=9.82$, $p=0.01$], with partial eta squared equivalent to 0.47, indicating that self-esteem accounted for 47% of the variance in school attitude. The effect of abuse category on school attitude diminished when considering self-esteem, indicating that self-esteem is a protective factor for girls who are abused.

Discussion

This study was conducted to determine whether self-esteem had any positive influence in physically abused females' attitude towards school and academic performance. The results of this study showed that females who had been beaten had significantly lower self-esteem and a more negative attitude toward school than their peers. Although their grade point average was lower, it did not reach statistical significance. Overall, these results indicate that self-esteem appears to be a possible mediator in the relationship between PA and ATS.

Consistent with previous research (7, 14, 23), these findings support the theoretical speculation that specific types of maltreatment produce different degrees of impairment, and perhaps unique cognitive and behavioral profiles (3, 5, 6). Though not directly replicative, these results are also consistent with previous findings that individuals who have suffered PA have lower grades and self-esteem when compared to other maltreated groups (14). It is important to note that our results do not contradict the research on the negative effects of abuse in important life outcomes for children (3). Needless to say, for the entire sample, a history of any abuse contributed to self-regulation and social difficulties in school.

This study showed that PA can negatively affect an individual's attitude toward school. Previous research indicates that PA increases both externalizing and internalizing behaviors, which can impair school functioning (2, 20–22). An explanation of this relationship may be the constant negative reinforcement that disruptive students receive from both their teachers and peers. On the contrary, self-esteem increases with the reinforcement of positive behaviors (34), and it appears that rewarding positive behaviors may be the key to increasing both self-esteem and ATS in troubled students. It is important for school staff to be aware of the resources that can be used to build the self-worth of disruptive students.

Belonging to a minority group and living in poverty have been associated with PA (3). Although PA happens in a variety of settings (11–14), it tends to also be associated with families who experience a higher rate of risk factors (3).

Therefore, measures of socioeconomic status should be included among contextual variables in the future in order to facilitate understanding PA profiles. Literature supports the fact that in many collectivistic cultures PA is seen as a positive way of building character and creating good citizens, even to the

Table 1 Descriptive statistics: self-esteem and attitude to school by abuse history.

	Age		GPA		Self-esteem		School attitude (negative)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Not reported	12.57	2.51	2.10	0.460	14.86	2.19	2.43	1.72
Abused	12.33	3.32	1.89	0.169	10.00	4.04	6.43	2.82
Total	12.44	2.30	1.97	0.322	12.42	4.01	4.43	3.06
<i>F</i> -value	0.03		1.62		7.81		10.27	
<i>p</i> -value	0.877		0.226		0.016		0.008	

F-values indicate the level of difference between girls in age, GPA, self-esteem, and school attitudes by abuse history group. The statistical significance of those differences are indicated by *p*-values. $n=14$. *M*, mean; *SD*, standard deviation.

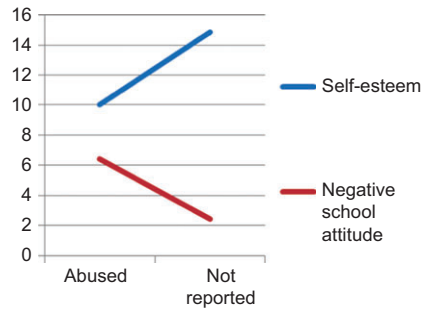


Figure 1 Self-esteem and school attitudes by abuse history.

Table 2 Analysis of covariance for the effects of physical abuse and self-esteem on attitude to school.

Source	F	Significance	Partial eta squared
Self-esteem	9.82	0.01	0.47
Abused	1.74	0.21	0.14

n=14.

degree of significantly increasing death rates because of PA (6, 7, 10). It seems as though investing in parental education and imparting alternative ways to discipline children might be an effective way to combat PA in our communities. Although the current study was correlational in nature so that causality cannot be inferred, the findings suggest that self-esteem may maximize ways of coping, particularly with the negative effects of PA, for some females from collectivistic cultures, such as Nicaragua.

There are several limitations to this research. First, there was a disproportionate distribution among the ages of the children who participated, and the sample was relatively small. Thus, the generalizability of the findings is limited to this group and setting. Second, the measures used were by self-report, although additional data were collected from caregivers. Finally, the design and analyses make it impossible to infer causality. Despite these limitations, the associations found in this study demonstrate a possible, but not proven, role of self-esteem as a protective factor for females who experience PA, in their attitudes toward school.

Clearly, future research is necessary to understand how much self-esteem can influence outcome in the lives of females who suffer PA. Longitudinal studies would allow for an examination of the role of self-esteem in this group during their life span. Examining whether or how our results may change over time as participants mature would be useful in facilitating self-esteem as a protective factor and its relationship to functioning and outcome in this specific population. In the future, researchers and clinicians also might want to examine positive coping behaviors related to self-esteem and how resiliency may influence school attitude and academic performance in this population.

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