

Summary

The Mediating Role of Perceived Partner Responsiveness on The Relationship between Perceived Parental Sensitivity and Physical Aggression

Gamze Er-Vargün¹

Cansu Yılmaz²

Low parental sensitivity (parental behaviors that include love, warmth, and acceptance; Sümer & Güngör, 1999) is associated with negative social behaviors such as aggression in childhood and adolescence (Newton et al., 2014; Pastorelli et al., 2015). However, the role of past experiences of parental sensitivity on adults' aggressive behavior is a relatively new research topic. Although there is evidence that positive perceptions of parental sensitivity play a protective role against the risk of aggressive behavior in adulthood (e.g., McKinney et al., 2016), research on the mechanisms underlying this relationship is limited. Especially considering the increase in the importance and priority of the relationship with the romantic partner in young adulthood years (Doherty & Feeney, 2004), the role of the romantic partner should not be ignored in examining the effects of childhood experiences on young adult behaviors. The literature on adult intimate relationships suggests that individuals' perceptions of parental sensitivity in childhood affect their perceptions of their romantic partners' responsiveness (the extent to which the partner understands, cares for, and values the individual; Reis, 2012; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004) in adulthood (Collins & Read, 1990). However, the effects of partner responsiveness on the relationship between parental sensitivity and physical aggression in adulthood have not yet been investigated. This study aims to examine the potential mediating role of perceived partner responsiveness in the relationship between perceived parental sensitivity and physical aggression in young adulthood.

Method

Participants

Individuals between the ages of 18-28 who were in a romantic relationship were invited to participate in

the study. In total, 975 people accessed the questionnaire and 295 young adults (211 females, 81 males, 3 who preferred not to report their gender; $M_{age} = 21.41$, $SE_{age} = 2.31$) who completed all of the study measures were included in the study. Twelve of the participants were married, 229 were dating, and 54 preferred not to indicate their relationship status. Nineteen of the participants were high school graduates, 271 were undergraduates, 4 were graduates, and 1 person preferred not to indicate their level of education.

Data Collection Method

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method. Data were collected electronically using an online questionnaire. The survey link was shared with participants via e-mail and social media, and their responses were automatically recorded in the software system. On the first page of the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide their consent.

Measures

Demographic questions. Participants were asked to report their age, gender, monthly income, education level, and relationship status to collect demographic information.

Parental sensitivity. The "acceptance/affection/love" sub-scale of the Child Rearing Styles Scale developed by Sümer and Güngör (1999) was used to measure parental sensitivity. Parental sensitivity was assessed separately for the mother and father. Participants rated the scale items on a 5-point scale (1 = not true at all, 5 = very true). Parental sensitivity scores were calculated by averaging responses to all scale items. The alpha values for mother and father scales in this study were .93 and .94, respectively.

Address for Correspondence: ¹Gamze Er-Vargün, gamzeer@anadolu.edu.tr

²Dr. Cansu Yılmaz, cansu_yilmaz@anadolu.edu.tr

Perceived partner responsiveness. In order to measure perceived partner responsiveness, three items from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) longitudinal study, which have been used in previous research to assess perceived partner responsiveness (e.g., Selçuk et al., 2016; Selçuk et al., 2017; Tasfiliz et al., 2018) were used. These three items measure the three main components of partner responsiveness: the extent to which a partner understands, cares about, and values the individual, using a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The perceived partner responsiveness score was calculated by averaging the responses to these three items. The Cronbach's alpha value for perceived partner responsiveness measurement was calculated as .87 in this study.

Physical aggression. The physical aggression subscale of the Aggression Questionnaire developed by Buss and Perry (1992) and adapted into Turkish by Sümer (2003) was used to measure physical aggression tendencies. The physical aggression subscale consists of 9 items. Participants rated the scale items on a 5-point scale (1 = completely false, 5 = completely true). The physical aggression score was calculated by averaging the scale items. The Cronbach's alpha value for physical aggression scale was calculated as .83 in this study.

Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 21 program. SPSS-compatible Process Macro 4.2 (Hayes, 2013) was used to test the model of the study. Age, gender (-1 = female, 1 = male) and educational level (-1 = high school and below, 1 = undergraduate and above) were included as control variables in the analyses.

Results

According to the correlation coefficients, both maternal sensitivity and father sensitivity were positively related to partner responsiveness. Partner responsiveness was found to be negatively related to physical aggression. However, neither maternal sensitivity nor paternal sensitivity were associated with physical aggression.

The mediating role of perceived partner responsiveness in the relationship between mother/father sensitivity and physical aggression was tested using the INDIRECT for SPSS (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Maternal sensitivity and paternal sensitivity did not directly predict physical aggression. Paternal sensitivity predicted physical aggression through perceived partner responsiveness, $B = -.018$, $SD = .009$, $CI [-.039, -.003]$. In other words, as the perceived sensitivity of the father in the past increased, the responsiveness perceived from the partner in adulthood increased, and thus physical aggression decreased.

The relationship between father sensitivity and physical aggression mediated by partner responsiveness remained significant after controlling for participants' gender, $B = -.019$, $SD = .009$, $CI [-.039, -.004]$. The association between maternal sensitivity and physical aggression was not mediated by perceived partner responsiveness, $B = -.012$, $SD = .009$, $CI [-.038, .001]$.

Discussion

In this study, the mediating role of perceived partner responsiveness in the relationship between perceived childhood maternal and paternal sensitivity and physical aggression in young adulthood was examined. Results showed that perceived paternal sensitivity in childhood positively predicted perceived partner responsiveness in young adulthood. According to attachment theory, secure relationships formed with parents during childhood serve as a model for adult relationships (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). This suggests that individuals who experienced security and sensitivity in their relationship with their parents during childhood perceive their partners as responsive or choose highly responsive partners. Hazan and Shaver (1987) support this notion, stating that parents' sensitive behavior during childhood creates positive perspectives on adult relationships. In this study, a positive association between perceived childhood parental sensitivity and perceived partner responsiveness was found for paternal sensitivity, but not for maternal sensitivity. One of the possible reasons why this association was not present for mothers may be due to social norms suggesting that mothers, as primary caregivers, spend more time with their children and they exhibit normative sensitivity, while fathers' sensitivity is less expected (Deneault, Cabrera, and Bureau, 2022; Mata and Van Dulmen, 2012; Williams and Kelly, 2005). Furthermore, social stereotypes about women's maternal roles and the fact that primary caregivers are predominantly mothers lead to a normative perception that mothers are already sensitive. On the other hand, while fathers are the primary individuals meeting the economic needs of their children, they spend less time with their children and provide less care compared to mothers (Cabrera, Volling, and Barr, 2018; Williams and Kelly, 2005). Therefore, high paternal sensitivity may have had a positive effect on perceived partner responsiveness, as it is not perceived as normative in the same way as maternal sensitivity.

The second hypothesis of the study, which suggested that perceived partner responsiveness would be negatively associated with physical aggression, was supported by the findings. A study conducted by Ruan, Reis, Clark, Hirsch, and Bink (2020) found that high

perceived partner responsiveness was beneficial for expressing emotions in romantic relationships. Although the current study examined the role of perceived partner responsiveness on the tendency towards physical aggression in general, individuals who perceive their partners as sensitive may prefer more constructive coping strategies rather than engaging in physically aggressive behaviors when encountering problems in both romantic and other interpersonal relationships. In this regard, high perceived partner responsiveness may have a protective function against negative social behaviors during young adulthood, a stage in which romantic relationships play an important role in individuals' lives.

In line with the final hypothesis of the study, the mediating role of perceived partner responsiveness in the relationship between perceived childhood maternal/paternal sensitivity and physical aggression was examined. Results demonstrated that perceiving high paternal sensitivity in childhood increased perceived partner responsiveness in young adulthood, thereby reducing physical aggression. This finding aligns with the assumptions of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1973), which forms the theoretical basis of the research. It suggests that young adults who perceive their father as sensitive in childhood also perceive their romantic partners as responsive, resulting in reduced physically aggressive behavior. High perceived paternal sensitivity fosters a sense of trust and sensitivity in close relationships, which is reflected in relationships with romantic partners. Young adults who perceive their partners as sensitive also exhibit lower levels of physical aggression. In this study, it was observed that the final hypothesis was supported for paternal sensitivity, but not for maternal sensitivity. According to father absence theory (Draper and Harperding, 1982), father absence may lead to competition and aggressive behavior in boys and early sexual experiences in girls. In contrast, children raised in environments where fathers are actively involved in family life have access to more resources and experience more stable relationships (Belsky et al., 1991). Although there has been a historical shift in the traditional roles of parenthood, with the mother traditionally responsible for the child's care and the father playing roles such as letting the children play (Lamb, 2000), recent research, such as the Fatherhood Research (carried out by AÇEV-Mother and Child Education Foundation) in Turkey has yielded significant findings (Bozok, 2018). According to the results of this research, while mothers are the primarily responsible for the childcare and household chores, fathers assume more responsibilities related to providing for the household. Fathers' busy working hours negatively affect the quality time they spend with their children. In this cultural context, high paternal sensitivity, which is not as normative

and expected as maternal sensitivity, positively predicts perceived partner responsiveness in romantic relationships in young adulthood, thereby reducing physical aggression.

We should address both the strengths and limitations of this study. First of all, it is worth noting that existing studies on parental sensitivity in the literature mainly focus on mothers' sensitivity (e.g. Alink et al., 2009; Olson et al., 2000). Therefore, one of the strengths of this study is its inclusion of measurements regarding perceived early parental sensitivity from both mothers and fathers, as reported by young adults. Another contribution of this study is that it reveals one of the mechanisms underlying the relationship between childhood parental sensitivity and adult physical aggression. In this respect, the study emphasizes the mediating role of adulthood relationships, which differentiates it from studies in the literature (e.g. Dodge et al., 2006) that focus on mechanisms related to childhood. However, the first limitation of the research is that the study design was cross-sectional. Examining the longitudinal effects of parental sensitivity could offer deeper insights into how these variables interrelate across different developmental periods. The second limitation is the use of retrospective measurements regarding parental sensitivity. Since retrospective measurements have disadvantages, such as inaccurate recall of the past, the results may not reflect the true nature of the relationship. Nonetheless, some researchers suggest that retrospective measurements are more reliable when the self-report method is used in adulthood (e.g. Reuben et al., 2016). The final limitation of the study is the use of self-report measurements, which may lead to responses influenced by social desirability.

Despite these limitations, these findings have important implications for both academics and practitioners in the field. For academics, the findings provide valuable insights into understanding the origins of perceived partner responsiveness in adulthood. For practitioners, the findings emphasize the importance of early relationships with parents in shaping romantic relationships and adjustment behaviors in young adulthood. Communicating the prospective outcomes of parental behaviors in childhood through empirical evidence can enhance the effectiveness of training, intervention, and seminar programs, such as parenting schools.