

## The role of parental authority and psychological symptoms in predicting female adolescents' tendency for suicidal ideation

Golnaz Ali Babaei<sup>1</sup>, Akbar Atadokht<sup>2\*</sup>, Niloufar Mikaeli<sup>3</sup> and Sayed Ali Sharififard<sup>4</sup>

1. M.A. in Clinical Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.
2. Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.
3. Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.
4. M.A. Student in Clinical Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.

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### Abstract

Given the vulnerability of female adolescents and the great sensitivity of suicidal ideation, it seems essential to study the etiology of this tendency and take precise actions to reduce and control it. Hence, the present study was conducted to investigate the role of parental authority and psychological symptoms in anticipating the suicidal ideation of female adolescents. The research method was descriptive-correlational and the population consisted of all female secondary school students in Naghadeh during the 2019-2020 academic year. Of this population, a sample consisting of 120 people was selected using multistage cluster sampling. The Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation (SSI), Buri Parental Authority Questionnaire and the Mental Disorders Checklist-Short Form were used to collect data and multiple regression was used to analyze the data. The results showed that the tendency for suicidal ideation had a negative relationship with parental authority and a positive relationship with psychological symptoms ( $p < 0.01$ ). Regression results also indicated that 24% of the variance in adolescent suicidal ideation was explained by parental authority and psychological symptoms ( $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, based on the results, special attention should be paid to the subject of adolescence in addition to parenting styles so as to prevent high-risk actions especially suicidal ideation among adolescent girls by preventing the occurrence of pathological consequences and symptoms and creating a favorable state of mental health.

### Keywords

Adolescents  
Parental authority  
Psychological profile  
Suicidal ideation

### Introduction

Adolescence is regarded as one of the most crucial and critical stages in human life that begins with puberty and culminates in adulthood. During this period, many changes occur in various physical, psychological and social domains (Berk, 2011). At this age, adolescents have a sensitive and fragile spirit and this sensitivity is more

evident in female adolescents (Troisi, 2001). Research suggests that the prevalence of mental disorders and behavioral problems including suicidal ideation has increased among adolescents in recent years (Solhi, Sadeghi, & Rudbari, 2012). This is seen particularly in adolescent girls who are psychologically more sensitive and vulnerable. These thoughts range from vague thoughts about the possibility of ending one's life to suicide (Rostami, Daliri, Sayehmiri, Delpisheh, & Sayehmiri,

2016). According to the official report of the World Health Organization, at least one million people end their lives all over the world by committing suicide every year (Barghi & Mirzaei, 2017). On the other hand, suicidal ideation can predict suicide attempt (Dour, Cha, & Nock, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct more in-depth studies on the correlated variables of suicidal ideation to allow for an early prevention of suicide.

Research suggests that there are many risk factors for suicidal ideation including demographic characteristics such as gender (females), low scores at school, low economic status and not living with one or both parents (Im, Oh, & Suk, 2017). Moreover, there are some risk factors involving behavioral and mental health such as depression, low sleep satisfaction, high stress, alcohol consumption, smoking and sexual compulsion (Im, Oh & Suk, 2017). In this context, one of the variables that seems to be related to suicidal ideation is parental authority which is one of the parenting styles. Baumrind has proposed three parenting styles which include authoritative, permissive and authoritarian styles (quoted in Qorbani & Amani, 2015). Parents with an authoritative parenting style are described as warm and intimate individuals who, while controlling their children's behaviors, use rational explanations for what they expect of their children and define clear rules for their children's appropriate behavior (Reitman, Rhodo & Hupp, 2002). According to the results, authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles, as well as maternal perfectionism were predictors of females' mental health (Tabaripour, Esmaili, & Hazare Dastan, 2016). Studies have shown that there is a negative and significant relationship between easy and strict parenting techniques and mental health; however, the authoritarian parenting style has no significant relationship with mental health (Taram & Kaykhosravi, 2018). Barghi and Mirzaei (2017) have also concluded that the subscales of authoritative style and authoritarian style of parents from the dimensions of parenting style scales, respectively predict the rate of suicidal thoughts inversely and directly. Research by Li, Loebroksm, and Siegrist (2016) suggests that parental job stress has a positive relationship with low parental support which in turn is associated with adolescent suicidal ideation. This relationship weakened significantly after additional adjustments for parental support. It is worth mentioning that the level of job stress among mothers has greater effects on children's suicidal thoughts compared to job stress among fathers.

Moreover, psychological symptoms (i.e. mental health) are among the key variables addressed in the present study. Although mental health is considered mostly based on the absence of a mental disorders, mental health is defined as "a state of well-being through which people recognize their abilities, cope with normal stress, and work productively and efficiently with a share of

cooperation and effectiveness for small communities (World Health Organization, 2003; Ratos & Navid, 2017).

Furthermore, studies indicate that if students experience psychological problems and conflicts, they will not be able to adapt to the school environment, teachers, friends and family (Jafari, 2003). Therefore, if done properly in a way that the mental health of this group is ensured by paying attention to this group and examining their problems especially in the field of mental health, we can expect a better and brighter future and a more desirable society in the political, cultural, and socioeconomic domains (Jahani, Hashemi & Nowruz, 2004). In investigating the psychological problems of adolescent girls, the results showed a higher level of paranoid symptoms compared to other dimensions. The average of symptoms in all dimensions was higher in girls as compared to boys. The difference is that in all dimensions except aggression, the average symptoms are significantly higher among girls. Based on research findings, 10% of high school students might have a mental disorder. The most common psychological symptoms based on the nine dimensions of the test were paranoid thoughts, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety and aggression. The average condition of psychological dimensions in adolescents with a history of corporal punishment, history of dropout, addiction and mental disorder in the family was on the rise which was also statistically significant (Zamani Alavijeh, Shahri, Zarei, & Iqbal, 2012). Furthermore, a research by Bowen et al. (2011) has shown that psychological instability through the Emotional Equality Scale determines the type of depression that predicts suicidal ideation and psychological instability may be directly related to suicidal ideation compared to neurosis. In another study conducted by Mohammad Khani (2001), it was concluded that people who attempted suicide had significantly more depressive symptoms, thus according to the findings of the study, the depression syndrome and general psychological disorders were significantly related to suicidal thoughts and the history of suicide attempts in those who had attempted suicide. The results of the research performed by Liu et al. (2017) also showed that the non-self-injury group had significantly higher scores on anger, motivation, frustration, and internal and external problems in comparison with adolescents who had committed suicide or non-suicidal self-injury. In the non-suicidal self-injury group with a history suicide attempt and in the suicidal self-injury group, the scores were significantly higher than the scores of the non-suicidal self-harm group, but there was no significant difference in most of the psychological and behavioral variables in both groups. The results also showed that the risk of suicidal behaviors was significantly related to different types of psychological symptoms and depression. Furthermore, obsessive-compulsive disorder was positively and significantly related to suicidal behaviors in female

students. Additionally, the risk of suicidal behaviors had a significant positive and direct relationship with the total score of positive symptoms (Tang, Byrne & Qin, 2018). Therefore, because adolescence is one of the most important and critical stages of development, it is necessary to study the mental health of adolescents and especially girls who are more exposed to psychological trauma. One of the psychological traumas among female high school students is the tendency for suicidal ideation that indicates the possibility of successful suicide. Therefore, given the vulnerability of girls and the case of suicide as a psychiatric priority and, more importantly, the paucity of research on this subject, the present study was an attempt to investigate the role of parental authority and psychological symptoms in predicting the tendency of female students for suicidal ideation in Naghadeh city.

## Method

### Participants

The method of the present study was descriptive-correlational. The population consisted of all female high school students in Naghadeh city in 2019-2020 academic year, of whom 120 people were selected as the sample. This sample size was considered appropriate since this research was a correlational study with two predictor variables (Delavar, 2013). Multi-stage cluster sampling was used to select the sample. In this type of sampling, the members of the population are selected from different types of units based on a hierarchy (from larger to smaller units). In the present study, the population of female high school students in Naghadeh was divided into high schools. Then, two classes were randomly selected from each school. In order to analyze the data, descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum scores were considered in SPSS-25. Multiple regression was also used to calculate the results following the conditions for using multiple regression and the acceptable correlation between variables in this model.

### Instrument

#### *Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation*

This scale was developed by Aaron Beck in 1961 with 19 items and each item has three options that are scored on a scale of 0 to 2, respectively. A higher score on this scale indicates a greater tendency for suicidal thoughts. The validity of the scale was 0.87 to 0.97 using the Cronbach's alpha and 0.54 using the retest method (Beek & Steer, 1991). In Iran, Beck questionnaire was validated on soldiers. The results showed that the overall validity of the scale was 0.76 and its validity was 0.95 using the Cronbach's alpha (Anisi et al., 2005).

#### *Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ)*

This questionnaire was developed by Baumrind to

measure children's perceptions of parenting styles. The reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was calculated using the retest method and was determined for mother's authoritarian style (0.78), for father authoritarian style (0.92), for authoritative style of mothers (0.86), for authoritative style of fathers (0.85), for mothers' permissive style (0.81) and for fathers' permissive style (0.77) (Buri, 2010). The retest reliability of this questionnaire was also calculated for the permissive method (0.69), the authoritarian method (0.77) and the authoritative method (0.73) (Buri, 2010).

The validity of the questionnaire as determined by the differential validity method is such that the authoritarian style of the mother is inversely related to the permissive style (-0.38), the authoritarian style of the father is inversely related to the permissive style (-0.50), the authoritarian style of the mother is inversely related to the mother's authoritative style (-0.48), and the authoritarian style of the father is inversely related to the authoritative style of the father (-0.52). In this case, the mother's authoritative style had a positive correlation with the permissive style (0.07) and the father's authoritative style had an insignificant positive correlation with the father's permissive style (0.12) (Buri, 2010). This questionnaire was translated by Esfandiari and has been used with some modifications. The content validity of the questionnaire is reported to be satisfactory based on the assessment of 10 experts in the field of psychology and psychiatry (Esfandiari, 1995).

#### *Psychological Disorders Symptoms Checklist-Short Form (SCL-25)*

This scale is the shortened form of the revised version of the 90-symptom list SCL-90-R that was developed by Najarian (Najarian & Davoodi, 2001). It consists of 25 items. The score of each question is given on a continuum from 1 (for none) to 5 (for most of the time). In one study, the reliability of SCL-25 was reported by calculating the internal consistency and retest statistical coefficients. The coefficient of validity was calculated as 0.78 following retests and 0.97 following internal consistency (Najarian & Davoodi, 2001). In another study, the reliability coefficients of this scale was calculated using the Cronbach's alpha, Spearman-Brown and Guttman were 0.92, 0.88 and 0.87, respectively and this indicates the relatively acceptable reliability of the scale (Movahed, 2003). To evaluate the validity of this scale, the correlation of SCL-25 was 0.69 for the general anxiety scale, 0.49 for Beck Depression Questionnaire, 0.66 for Ahwaz perfectionism scale and - 0.56 for the hardness scale all of which are significant at the level of 0.01. Additionally, the correlation between this scale and SCL-90 was 0.97 (Najarian & Davoodi, 2001).

### Procedure

To collect the data, the questionnaires were first prepared

and printed. Then, after arrangements with high school officials and teachers, one of the researchers visited the classes where the questionnaires and answer sheets were distributed among the students and collected upon completion.

## Results

At the level of descriptive statistics, 9 participants were excluded due to high data loss and the analysis was performed on 111 people. Their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1 in terms of field of study, mother's education and economic status.

**Table 1.** The demographic characteristics of the subjects by field of study, mother's education and economic status

Variables	Subtitle	F	%
<b>Field of Study</b>	Experimental Sciences	50	45.0
	Humanities	28	25.2
	Technical & Vocational School	33	29.7
<b>Mother's education</b>	Illiterate	24	21.6
	Elementary School	48	43.2
	Middle School	19	17.1
	High School Diploma	20	18.0
<b>Economic status</b>	High	38	34.2
	Average	69	62.2
	Low	4	3.6

Table 1 shows that the highest frequency of demographic variables was obtained in the field of empirical sciences with a frequency of 50, the elementary school in the category of mother's education with a frequency of 48 and the average economic status with a frequency of 69.

**Table 2.** Mean, standard deviation and Pearson correlation coefficients between parental authority variables, psychological symptoms and suicidal ideation

Variables	M	SD	Suicidal ideation	Parents' authority	Psychological symptoms
<b>Suicidal ideation</b>	5.38	6.91	-		
<b>Parents' authority</b>	9.05	4.96	0.3**	-	
<b>Psychological symptoms</b>	34.59	17.04	0.43**	0.13	-

\*\* p < .01, \* p < .05

Table 2 shows that there is a negative relationship between suicidal ideation and parental authority and a positive relationship with psychological symptoms (p<01).

**Table 3.** Results of multiple regression analysis of female adolescents' suicidal thoughts based on parental authority and psychological symptoms

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	P	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
<b>Regression</b>	1319.13	2	659.56	18.10	0.001	0.501	0.251	0.237
<b>Remaining</b>	4709.33	108	36.43					
<b>Total</b>	5254.11	110						
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	T	p			
<b>Constant</b>	-3.474	1.574		-	0.034			
<b>Parents' authority</b>	-0.36	0.117	-0.23	-2.8	0.006			
<b>Psychological symptoms</b>	0.16	0.034	0.40	4.7	0.000			

Table 3 shows that the model used is significant as the model predicts 24% of the variance for suicidal ideation. Beta coefficients also indicate that parental authority can predict 23% of the variance of the criterion variable while the psychological symptoms predict 40% of this variance.

## Discussion

In explaining the relationship between parental authority and suicidal ideation among female high school students, it can be said that the authoritative and decisive parenting styles led to the development of normal personality traits among individuals which is considered a healthy and nurturing approach. This is achieved by accurate and proper criteria in childhood, the accurate pattern of relationships and ultimately healthy developmental periods for children. In addition to triggering personal growth, this can increase resilience and rational thinking as a countermeasure to the events that are emotionally loaded. Ultimately, it prevents negative fantasies and especially suicidal thoughts which are more intense. In explaining the relationship between psychological symptoms and suicidal ideation among high school female students, we can first highlight the following. Given that adolescence is a critical and special stage in human life, it is coupled with behavioral-emotional and physiological changes. Reaching this stage of life is usually associated with worries and sensitive choices. Adolescents and especially girls can be more vulnerable to suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts compared to the other age groups and their male peers. This is due to their specific gender characteristics and the potential for emotional vulnerability in the context of social and family relationships (Barghi & Mirzaei, 2017). On the other hand, different dimensions of psychological symptoms especially depression, anxiety, aggression, sensitivity in relationships and psychosis can lead to psychological distress, confused mental states, and negative thoughts and fantasies. The emergence of emotional states and the creation of irrational and undesirable thoughts, which are the consequences of these psychological components,



might ultimately result in suicidal thoughts if they are allowed to continue (Sadock, Sadock, & Ruiz, 2015). Furthermore, the optimal state of mental health (i.e. psychological symptoms) and the reduction or absence of the mentioned conditions lead to positive psychological states and thoughts, which in turn are in conflict with suicidal thoughts by acting as a shield against undesirable social, familial, and personal events and circumstances. In addition to training parents and adolescents to improve general knowledge as a primary preventive solution, it is recommended that comprehensive programs be designed and implemented due to the need to address the psychological issues of adolescents and especially girls in order to screen those students who are at risk of suicide or self-harm. Then, individual and group training, counseling, and treatment should be pursued as a secondary preventive measure. On the other hand, since the present study was conducted on female adolescents from high schools in Naghadeh, the results cannot be generalized to the population of male students and other age groups. Hence, due to the frequency of suicidal thoughts among all ages and the special and sensitive conditions observed during adolescence, it is suggested that this research be conducted with a larger sample by controlling and measuring other components involving adolescent girls as well as adolescent boys and other age groups. Moreover, it is suggested that further studies be conducted on the factors that precede, mediate or occur simultaneously with parental authority and the psychological profile by focusing on suicidal ideation, adolescence and the aforementioned discussions.

## Conclusion

In general, the results showed that moral disengagement is directly related to high-risk behaviors and indirectly mediated by difficulties in emotion regulation. The limitation of the present research to a geographic area and its implementation on an academic level is one of the main limitations of this research. Therefore, it is suggested that this research be carried out in other geographic regions and in other educational levels. Practically, considering the role of the importance of mediating difficulty in regulating emotions in the tendency toward high-risk behaviors, holding educational management workshops and emotional adjustment for students is suggested.

## Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## ORCID

**Akbar Atadokht** <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5538-9242>

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