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Childhood Emotional Neglect, Psychological Distress: Moderating role of Peer Support in Young Adults

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Abstract

Psychological distress during young adulthood may be influenced by early emotional experiences and current interpersonal relationships. The current study investigates the relationship between childhood emotional neglect, peer support and psychological distress in young adults. A quantitative research design was used with 200 participants aged 18-25 years selected through purposive sampling from educational institutions of Lahore. Childhood emotional neglect, peer support and psychological distress were measured with the Childhood Emotional Neglect Questionnaire (CENQ), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived social support (MSPSS), and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), respectively. Data were analyzed using Pearson- product moment correlation, hierarchical regression, PROCESS moderation analysis and one way ANOVA. Childhood emotional neglect was significantly and positively associated with psychological distress while peer support was not significantly and directly associated with psychological distress. Hierarchical regression indicates that psychological distress was significantly predicted by childhood emotional neglect, while peer support was not a significant direct predictor. The regression model explained 12.5% of variance in psychological distress.

Moderation analysis showed significant interaction effects of friends' support (P= .017) and family support (P= .032), indicating that these sources of support moderated the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and psychological distress. There were significant socio-economic differences for childhood emotional and peer support, but not for psychological distress. The findings highlight the importance of considering childhood emotional experiences and interpersonal resources when understanding psychological distress among young adults.
Keywords: childhood emotional neglect, psychological distress, peer support, young adults

1. Introduction

Psychological functioning is a multifaceted process that emerges from emotional, cognitive and interpersonal processes over the course of life. Mental health is now perceived as less a lack of mental disorder and more a capacity to manage emotions, to deal with stress, to establish meaningful relationships with others, or to maintain a stable self-concept. This relationship can be disrupted and is often during a developmentally sensitive period, resulting in psychological distress, especially in young adults (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002). The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between psychological distress in young adults and the effects of emotional neglect in childhood as a developmental risk factor, and peer support as a contextual protective and moderating influence.

Given that psychological distress is especially prevalent at a young age, an understanding of the developmental characteristics of this life stage is required. The transition period of young adulthood from 18 and/or early 20's involves greater independence, identity experimentation and greater emotional and social responsibilities. At this point individuals have to deal with school stress, work stress, and family stress, among others. These requests put stress on emotional regulation system and coping skills. People who enter young adulthood with unmet emotional needs stemming from early childhood care and up are highly vulnerable to emotional problems. Therefore a developmental perspective linking early emotional experiences to later psychological outcomes is required to understand psychological distress adults (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002).

Childhood emotional neglect is a very subtle, but powerful, emotional hardship. Emotional neglect differs from physical abuse or neglect because it does not require overtly harmful behaviors; instead it is a lack of emotional responsiveness, warmth and validation (Bernstein et al., 2003).

Emotional neglect can happen in seemingly normal families in subtle ways and can go unnoticed or unrecognized until later in the developmental process when the emotional and interpersonal needs grow. Concurrently, there are opportunities for developing resilience during young adulthood through supportive interpersonal relationship, particularly peer relationship. Peer support is an important factor in undermining emotional well-being and has been shown to affect the impact of early emotional neglect on psychological distress (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

This current study explores the relationship between emotional neglect in childhood and psychological distress with the mediation of role of peer supports between them. The aim of this study is to introduce these constructs into a single conceptual framework which will help to gain a theoretically informed understanding of vulnerability and resilience processes in young adulthood.

Psychological distress is the subjective experience of emotional suffering and problems managing inner and outer stressors. It is characterized by sadness, anxiety, irritability, emotional tension, and a sense of being overwhelmed, and can happen even if a person doesn't have a diagnosed mental disorder (Kessler et al., 2002). Emotional regulation is also closely linked to psychological distress, and the inability to regulate emotional responses can increase distress and negatively impact attention, decision-making, and functioning (Gross, 1998). While suppressing, avoiding, and ruminating about negative emotions might temporarily alleviate them, over time these coping mechanisms may exacerbate negative emotions and decrease psychological flexibility (Aldao et al., 2016).

The effect of maladaptive emotional regulation technique may become more noticeable as individual's entered into young adulthood. This developmental period with heightened emotional, social and academic needs could exacerbate current vulnerabilities and developing psychological distress. Due to accumulated pressure of development, young adulthood is a time of increased susceptibility to psychological distress. When it comes to making significant life experiences around education, career and relationships, individuals have to face uncertainties and social expectations. Emotional problems may get worse at this time because of financial stress, school pressure and interpersonal conflicts (Arnett, 2000).

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Ongoing psychological suffering can impact on functioning, such as school and work performance, motivation, and relationships with others. It can also lead to social isolation and avoidance of situations that involve emotional demands (Beck, 1967; Kessler et al., 2002). Unresolved emotional issues can further impact on self-concept, emotional maturity and relationship quality over time (Erikson, 1968).

Emotional regulation involves how people regulate and respond to their emotions in a variety of contexts. While the ability to regulate emotions is associated with adaptation and emotional stability, ongoing challenges in emotional regulation can result in greater risk of experiencing psychological distress (Gross, 1998; Aldao et al., 2016). These needs are especially important in the young adult years when people are more independent, responsible, uncertain, and dealing with interpersonal issues. People who experience emotionally unsupportive caregiving environments might be at greater risk when they experience experiences that disrupt adaptive emotional regulation development (Morris et al., 2017).

Maladaptive cognitive processes, such as negative self-evaluation, catastrophic thinking and trouble realistically receiving stressful situations, are also associated with psychological distress. Distressed people may feel overwhelmed and helpless, which adds to emotional stress and reduces the effectiveness of coping strategies (Beck.1967). Emotional distress and cognitive vulnerability are interconnected and impact on how a person understands their experiences. Cognitive bases associated with competence, self-worth and future ambitions might exacerbate stress and emotional discomfort in young adults. These cognitive patterns can cause psychological distress to continue across developmental phases and are often a result of previous emotional learning experiences (Beck.1967). The transition into young adulthood is a pivotal time in which people

are expected to form values, goals, and a sense of self. Psychological distress can disrupt this process, leading to uncertainty, low self-confidence and problems with identity development (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz et al., 2011). The identity issues are also linked to poorer psychological adjustment and emotional wellness (Luyckx et al., 2013). Emotional neglect in childhood is when the parent or caregiver repeatedly neglects to be emotionally responsive, warm, validating and supporting.

Children can be physically cared for, but not emotionally, and neglect can be hard to identify (Bernstein et al., 2003). Early care experiences affect emotional awareness, emotional regulation, and coping. Emotionally unresponsive care can impede the development of these skills, leading to greater risk of emotional problems and psychological distress later in life (Morris et al., 2017; Gruhn & Compas, 2020).

Emotional neglect can also impact one's self-perception and interpersonal relationship. Emotional invalidation can lead to the development of self-criticism, emotional suppression, emptiness, and a lack of emotional expression. These experiences can lead to a lack of trust and emotional security in relationships, which can make people more likely to use avoidance and other negative coping mechanisms (Bernstein et al., 2003; Bowlby, 1969). According to the theory of attachment, relationships with caregivers in early childhood influence one's expectations for self and others. Insecure attachment patterns may impact emotional regulation, trust, and help-seeking in adulthood, and may be influenced by emotionally unavailable caregiving (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019).

The perceived availability and quality of interpersonal emotional and informational support from peers is referred to as peer support. As people navigate developmental transitions and increased social roles during young adulthood, peers become increasingly significant sources of emotional connection, validation and social belonging. By offering a setting where people feel understood, accepted and appreciated supportive peer connection help in emotional adjustment, self-development and general psychological well-being (Rueger et al., 2016).

Peer support may be crucial assisting people in coping with emotional difficulties and and stressful life events, given the growing importance of peer relationships during young adulthood. According to modern theories of social support, helpful interpersonal connections foster resilience by offering

possibilities for adaptive coping, practical help and emotional resources. Peer support may thereby lessen the negative psychological effects of stress and emotional challenges (Thoits, 2011).

Emotional well-being is enhanced by supportive peer interaction, which offers acceptance, empathy, assurance and encouragement. These emotional resources may help people in better emotional regulation, stress management and preserving psychological stability in trying situations. Peer support also fosters social integration and enhances a sense of belonging and togetherness, both of which are critical for young adults' psychological well-being (Rueger et al., 2016).

Stress buffering paradigm suggests that social support offers interpersonal and emotional resources that lesson the adverse psychological impacts of stress. Peer support, then, can help eliminate this association between psychological pain and emotional neglect during childhood (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The developmental psychopathology perspective, which focuses on the interactive development of risk and protective factors over the life course, can help illuminate the possibility of protection by peer support (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002).

From this perspective, supportive peer relationships can serve as a protective factor to foster resilience and adaptive functioning, while emotional maltreatment in childhood provides a major risk factor. Positive social relationships have the potential to alter developmental pathways through the enhancement of emotional competence, better coping mechanisms, and reduced vulnerability to psychological problems. Psychological distress in young adults can be seen as a product of past emotional experiences and present social and interpersonal contexts (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002).

Young adulthood is a developmental stage of life that is marked by greater independence, self-identity formation, and shifting roles in the school, workplace, and social world. These demands can exacerbate current emotional weaknesses, especially for those who have experienced childhood adversity (Arnett, 2015; Luyckx et al., 2013). Peer relationships are particularly significant at this time as they offer companionship, emotional validation, and opportunities for shared coping. On the other hand, social rejection or lack of perceived support can lead to greater emotional distress and loneliness (Thoits, 2011).

Perceived peer support is defined as an individual's perception of emotional and practical support

available when needed. This perception can help to maintain emotional balance and better stress management (Cohen & Wills, 1985). For those who had a childhood of emotional neglect, supportive peers may offer them a sense of acceptance, reassurance, and validation that was missing in their early relationships. These resources can enhance coping skills and minimize risk for psychological problems (Rueger et al., 2016; Fritz et al., 2018).

Childhood emotional neglect is the lack of emotional warmth, validation and guidance in childhood development. Children look to caregivers for emotional awareness and regulation, so poor emotional responsiveness can disrupt children's ability to develop these skills, and can make them more vulnerable to emotional problems later in life (Bernstein et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 1998). These experiences can also lead to negative self-beliefs, emotional withdrawal, and maladaptive coping (rumination and suppression) (Beck, 1967; Gross, 1998). Psychological distress includes the symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress, and indicates emotional problems that may be present in the absence of a mental disorder (Kessler et al., 2002).

The present study combines the attachment theory, emotion regulation theory, stress-buffering model, and the developmental psychopathology perspective to explore the phenomenon of childhood emotional neglect and psychological distress in young adults. It suggests that childhood emotional neglect could be linked to higher psychological distress and peer support could buffer this relationship by dampening its impact. This framework illustrates how positive peer relationships can contribute to psychological adjustment in early adulthood with negative early emotional experiences.

2. Literature Review

This chapter examines the empirical researches on childhood emotional neglect, peer support and psychological distress among young adults. This review’s objectives are to explore theoretical and empirical foundations for the purposed study and to look at the evidences currently available regarding the relationship between these factors. Emotional neglect early childhood has been repeatedly shown to be a major developmental risk factor associated to negative emotional and psychological outcomes. Peer support, in contrast, has been a crucial protective resource that may increase resilience and lessen susceptibility to distress. This chapter studied the potential

moderating impact of peer support in association among psychological distress and childhood emotional neglect by examining recent research.

A systematic review and meta-analysis of the impacts of psychological abuse in childhood, including emotional neglect on adult mental health outcomes was carried out by Xiao et al. in 2023. The findings revealed a strong correlation between childhood emotional neglect, anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation and general psychological distress in later life. The authors came to the conclusion that emotional neglect has psychological consequences that persist long after childhood and continue to have an impact on emotional well-being throughout life.

A meta-analytic review by Gruhn and Compas (2020) examined how abuse during childhood affecting coping and emotion regulation. According to their research, people who experienced emotional neglect had higher level of anxiety and depression as well as more emotional dysregulation, one key component associating psychological distress and childhood emotional neglect was determined to be emotion dysregulation.

Morris et al, (2017) examined how parental experiences impacts on children's and adolescent's emotional regulation and growth. According to the study children who have emotionally competent caregivers are better able to comprehend, express and regulate their emotions. In contrast, caregiving environments that are emotional negligent might prevent the development of these abilities, making people more susceptible to emotional difficulties. According to authors, individuals who do not get sufficient emotional guidance frequently struggle later in life with emotional awareness and adaptive coping mechanisms. The results highlighted that emotional neglect may have long-term consequences on psychological.

Southwick et al, (2016) investigated how social support promotes resilience and protect individuals from the negative psychological impacts of stress. According to study, one of the most reliable indicators of psychological well-being throughout life is having supportive social connections. When faced with negative life events, people with larger social support network reported feeling less depressed, anxious and emotionally distressed. According to the researchers, social support fosters resilience by boosting coping mechanism, lowering feelings of loneliness and offering emotional reassurance. Furthermore, those who have supportive relationships are better able to regulate emotions and keep a positive attitude under pressure. The finding support the idea that

peer support plays a role as protective factor, reduce psychological distress during emotionally demanding developmental periods such as young adults.

Rueger et al, (2016) examines the relationship between young individual's depressive symptoms and their perception of social support. Peer support and psychological distress are significantly correlated negatively. Individuals with lower levels of depression, emotional difficulties and psychological maladjustment reported feeling more support from their peers. The researchers suggested that by encouraging emotions of acceptance, interpersonal closeness and belonging, supportive peer interactions enhance emotional well-being. According to Rueger et al. (2016), these findings provide strong empirical proof for the protective role of peer support in enhancing mental health and lowering psychological distress.

Schury etal, (2017) investigated how abuse during childhood affects emotional functioning and stressful reactivity. According to the study, individuals who had experienced emotional neglect showed increased emotional and physiological reactions to stress. Long –term emotional deprivation may change stress-response mechanism, making people more susceptible to emotional difficulties and psychological distress. Furthermore, it was discovered that when faced with stressful events, emotionally neglected people had lower coping skills and higher emotional sensitivity. According to developmental models, emotional neglect throughout childhood might lead to long-term emotional vulnerability and psychological maladjustment.

A Comprehensive study conducted by Fritz at al, (2018) examines resilience factors that either modify or alter the association between mental health outcomes and childhood adversity. According to the study, social support is one of the most crucial protective factors that might reduce the adverse psychological effects of childhood experiences. Despite being effected by traumatic childhood experiences. People who reported having larger support connections showed improved emotional adjustment and reduce psychological distress. The author's underlines that through fostering resilience, enhancing coping skills and improving emotional competence, supportive interpersonal relationships may change developmental pathways. According to these findings, peer support may be essential in lessening the negative effects of emotional neglect during childhood on psychological distress later in life.

3. Methodology

The research design for this study was quantitative correlational research design aimed at exploring the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and psychological distress among young adults and moderating role of peer support. A total of 200 respondents between the age of 18-25 were selected using purposive non-probability sampling method from Lahore. Participants were currently attending college, university, or other education institution, and had experience of primary caregiving as children, which allowed them to report on their childhood emotional experiences. People not within the age group and those who reported clinical psychological disorders, chronic disease or physical disability were excluded.

A demographic information sheet, the Childhood Emotional Neglect Questionnaire (CENQ), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) were used to gather data. The demographic sheet consisted of age, gender, marital status, family system, socioeconomic status, education level, birth order, residential area and current status.

CENQ is a 22 item yes/no questionnaire created by Jonice Webb, 2018, on emotional neglect experiences including emotional distance, lack of trust in others, self-judgment, social discomfort and emotional emptiness. The MSPSS, created by Zimet et al. (1988), consists of 12 items that assess perceived support from family, friends and significant others, each of which is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree). The Kessler 10 (K10) is a 10 item scale that is used to assess nonspecific psychological distress such as anxiety and depressive symptoms (Kessler et al., 2002). The items are rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (None of the time) to 5 (All of the time).

Before data collection, permission was given by the relevant institutional authorities and permission by the scale authors and informed consent was gained from the participants. There was voluntary participation and the participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained, deception was avoided and ethical research practice was followed throughout the study.

The data were entered and analyzed in SPSS version 26. Pearson product–moment correlation was

used to explore the associations between the study variables, and moderation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro to assess whether the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and psychological distress was moderated by peer support. Linear regression was used to assess predictive relationships.

4. Results

The research was conducted to explore the relationship between childhood emotional neglect, peer support and psychological distress among young adults. Childhood emotional neglect, peer support and psychological distress were evaluated using psychological tests and questionnaires. Several Statistical techniques were used to evaluate the data, including descriptive analysis, reliability coefficients for the study variables, and Pearson product moment correlation to look into the connection between adolescents was conducted to look into the direction and strength of the relationship among childhood emotional neglect, peer support and psychological distress. The moderating impact of peer support on the direction and intensity of the link between childhood emotional neglect and psychological distress were investigated by using PROCESS MACRO. The moderation analysis helped identifying whether the effect of childhood emotional neglect on psychological distress varies across different levels of peer support.

Table 1: Demographics characteristics, frequency, percentage of participants (N=200)

Characteristics		***F (%)***	***M(SD)***
Age (year)			22.33 (2.01)
	18 to 25		
Gender			
	Male	30 (15%)	
	female	170 (85%)	

	Total	200 (100%)	
Marital Status			
	Single	169 (84.5%)	
	Married	29 (14.5%)	
	Divorced	2 (1.0%)	
	Total	200 (100%)	
Family System			
	Nuclear	125 (62.5%)	
	Joint	75 (37.5%)	
	Total	200 (100%)	
Socio Economic Status			
	Lower Class	3 (1.5%)	
	Middle Class	185 (92.5%)	
	Upper Class	12(6.0%)	
	Total	200 (100%)	
Current Status			

	Student	164 (82%)	
	Employed	2 (1.0%)	
	Both study and job	34 (17%)	
	Total	200 (100%)	
Education Level			
	Undergraduate	130 (65%)	
	Graduate	36 (18%)	
	Postgraduate	34 (17%)	
	Total	200 (100%)	
Birth Order			
	1st Born	76(38%)	
	Middle child	86(43%)	
	Youngest child	35(17.5%)	
	Only child	3(1.5%)	
	Total	200 (100%)	
Residential Area			

	Urban	145 (72.5%)	
	Rural	55 (27.5%)	
	Total	200 (100%)	

Note: N= Frequency, M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, %= percentage

The participants demographics are presented in Table 1, by age, gender, marital status, family system, current status, socioeconomic status, education level, birth order and residential area. The average age of participants is 22.33 years with a stander deviation of 2.01. This means that the majority of the sample were young adults (ages 18-25) and the age range was relatively small. The sample is nearly female with 85% being female and 30% male. Most of the participants (84.5%) are single, 14.5% are married and 1% divorced. Among family systems (62.5%) reported from nuclear family system, and (37.5%) reported from joint family system. Most participants (92.5%) were from the middle class, 6 were from the upper class and 3 were from the lower class (1.5%). The majority of participants (82%) were students, while 17% reported to be both students and workers, and only 1% were only workers. The highest level of education was accomplished by (65%) participants who were enrolled in undergraduate programs, (18%) were graduates and (17%) were postgraduates. The largest proportion of participants (43%) were consisted as middle child, followed by (38%) 1st born, (35%) were youngest child while only (1.5%) participants were the only child in their family. Most of the participants (72.5%) lived in urban areas and (27.5%) lived in rural areas.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficient of Assessment measures (N=200)

Variables	***M***	***SD***	***Ranges***	α
Childhood Emotional Neglect	31.24	5.05	22	0.75
Peer Support				
Family Support	18.09	46.39	24	.85

Friends Support	17.12	45.17	24	.84
Significant others	17.33	50.11	24	.85
Psychological Distress	29.10	8.96	40	.89

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, a= Reliability Coefficient, α= *Cronbach's alpha*

The mean, standard deviation and reliability of scales were presented in Table 2. High reliability of .75 was obtained for Cronbach Alpha of Childhood Emotional Neglect, .85 for Family Support, .84 for Friends Support, .85 for Significant others Support, .89 for Psychological Distress and the summary of the table was that all study variables were satisfactory reliable. Overall the psychometrics suggests acceptable values and represents the usefulness of using these scales for research purposes.

Table 3: Pearson Moment Correlation of study variables (N=200)

Variables	***M***	***SD***	***1***	***2***	***3***	***4***	***5***
Childhood Emotional Neglect	31.24	5.05	1	-.35**	.04	.01	-.01
Psychological Distress	29.10	8.96		1	-.05	.00	.01
Significant other support	17.33	7.08			1	.69**	.64**
Family support	18.09	6.81				1	.62**
Friends support	17.12	6.72					1

*Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation**p<0.01 (2-tailed)*

Table 3 shows the findings of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation to identify the relationship between Childhood Emotional Neglect, Psychological Distress, family support, friends support and the significant others of young adults. The findings show that Childhood Emotional Neglect is significantly negatively related to Psychological Distress. The correlation between Childhood

Emotional Neglect, family support, friends support and significant others were positive but non-significant. Likewise, the significant others support family support and friends support were weakly and non-significantly related with Psychological Distress. In contrast the three Peer Support's sub variables were strongly and significantly interrelated with each other.

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Coefficient predicting psychological distress from childhood emotional neglect and peer supports sub-scales after controlling for age, gender and socioeconomic status among young adults (N=200)

Variable	***B***	***95% CI for B***	***SE B***	***β***	***R^2***	***ΔR^2***	
		LL	***UL***				
Model 1: Demographics						.03	.03***
Constant	35.75	19.67	51.83	8.16			
Age	-.08	-.71	.55	.32	-.02		
Gender	2.72	-.80	6.25	1.79	.11		
Family System	.99	-1..60	3.59	1.32	.05		
Socio-economic status	-4.58	-9.23	.06	2.36	-.14		
Model 2:						.14	.11***
Constant	48.6	32.62	64.5	8.10			
Age	-.02	-.62	.57	.30	-.01		

Gender	3.06	-.27	6.38	1.69	.12		
Family System	.68	-1.77	3.13	1.24	.04		
Socio-economic Status	-2.14	-6.63	2.34	2.27	-.07		
Childhood emotional neglect	-.61**	-.85	-.37	.12	-.34		
Model 3:						.15	.01***
Constant	48.09	31.53	64.65	8.40			
Age	-.02	-.64	.60	.32	-.00		
Gender	2.91	-.47	6.29	1.71	.12		
Family System	.79	-1.70	3.28	1.26	.04		
Socio-economic Status	-2.10	-6.70	2.50	2.33	-.06		
Childhood emotional neglect	-.60	-.84	-.36	.12	-.34***		
Significant others support	-.10	-.35	.16	.13	-.08		
Family support	.06	-.21	.32	.13	.04		
Friends support	.04	-.21	.29	.13	.03		

Note: N=200, B= Unstandardized Coefficient, β= Standardized Coefficient, R^2 = r square,

****p<.001.*

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis showed that emotional neglect in childhood was a significant predictor of psychological distress even when controlling for the demographic factors and peer support (family support, friends support and significant others). In step 1 demographic variable alone was not a significant predictor of psychological distress. When emotional neglect in childhood was added in step 2, the explained variance was greatly increased indicating that it was a strong and direct predictor of higher levels of stress. The addition of social support variable in step 3 did not add any extra predictive power and none of the support variables was significant. This discovery suggests that social support is a significant factor, but does not have a direct effect on psychological distress above and beyond the effect of childhood emotional neglect in this sample.

Table 5: Moderation of Friends Support between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress

variables	**Estimates**	**SE**	**95% CL**		**P**
			LL	**UL**	
constant	24.92	12.81	-.35	50.20	.05
Childhood emotional neglect	.113	.42	-.71	.9325	.79
Friends support	1.37	.62	.15	2.59	.03**
CEN × FRI	-.043	.02	-.08	-.004	.032**

Note: SE= standard Error, CI=Confidence interval, LL= Lower Limit, UP= Upper Limit, CEN= P= Significance

Table 5 shows the moderation analysis testing if the relationship between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress is moderated by Peer Support. The interaction term CEN × FRI was significant, B = -.043, p = .032, suggesting that Friends Support is a significant moderator of this relationship. The main effect of Friends Support was significant, B = 1.37, p = .03, while the main effect of Childhood Emotional Neglect was not, B = .113, p = .79. The interaction between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress was significant and negative,

indicating that the positive relationship between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress was weaker when there was higher Peer Support. Therefore, Peer Support is a protective factor because it helps to reduce the negative effects of Childhood Emotional Neglect on psychological outcomes.

Table 6: Moderation of Family Support between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress

variables	Estimates	SE	95% CL		P
			LL	UL	
constant	23.42	12.13	-.49	47.34	.05
Childhood emotional neglect	.16	.39	-.62	.94	.68
Family support	1.41	.60	.23	2.59	.02**
CEN × FAM	-.04	.0192	-.0821	-.006	.023**

Note: SE= standard Error, CI=Confidence interval, LL= Lower Limit, UP= Upper Limit, CEN= P= Significance

Table 6 shows the moderation analysis of the relationship between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress, which was conducted to determine whether Family Support is a moderator of this relationship. The Family Support × CEN interaction was significant B = -.04, p = .0223, suggesting that Family Support significantly moderates this relationship. The main effect of Family Support was also significant, B = 1.41, p = .02, while the main effect of Childhood Emotional Neglect was not significant, B = .16, p = .68. The significant negative interaction indicates that the positive Childhood Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress relationship decreases as Family Support increases. Therefore, Family Support is a protective factor in that it helps to protect against the negative impact of Childhood Emotional Neglect on psychological outcomes.

Table 7: Moderation of Significant Others Support Support between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress

variables	Estimates	SE	95% CL		P
			LL	UL	
constant	25.84	11.97	2.22	49.46	.032
Childhood emotional neglect	13.04	.39	-.65	.91	.74
Significant others support	1.31	.58	.16	2.45	.025**
CEN × SO	-.04	.02	-.08	-.006	.02**

Note: SE= standard Error, CI=Confidence interval, LL= Lower Limit, UP= Upper Limit, CEN= P= Significance

Table 7 shows the moderation analysis results to determine if Significant Other Support is a moderator for the relationship between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress. The interaction effect CEN × SO was significant, B = -.04, p = .02, suggesting that Significant Other Support significantly moderates this relationship. The main effect of Significant Other Support was also significant, B = 1.31, p = .025, and the main effect of Childhood Emotional Neglect was not significant, B = .1304, p = .74. The strong negative interaction indicates that the positive effect of Childhood Emotional Neglect on Psychological Distress is diminished by increases in Significant Other Support. So, Significant Other Support is a protective factor in that it helps to alleviate the negative effects of Childhood Emotional Neglect on psychological outcomes.

Table 8: Comparison of scores of Childhood Emotional Neglect, Peer Support and Psychological Distress with socio economic status among young adults (N=200)

variables	**Lower**		**Middle**		**Upper**		**f**	**P**
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**		
Childhood Emotional neglect	26.33	1.53	31.07	4.99	35.08	4.58	5.203	.006
Psychological Distress	37.33	2.52	29.17	9.08	25.83	6.60	2.091	.126
Family Support	11.67	3.51	17.90	6.73	22.58	6.61	4.14	.17
Friends Support	11.33	2.08	17.05	6.78	19.58	5.71	1.95	.15
Significant Others	13.67	.58	17.06	7.14	22.42	4.42	3.74	.03**

*Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, *P<.05*

Table 8 compares the Childhood Emotional Neglect, Psychological Distress and Peer Support (Family support, Friends Support, Significant Others support status) between socioeconomic status group for young adults. The findings revealed that there was a significant difference between the socioeconomic status and childhood emotional neglect. The mean scores indicated a trend of increasing scores across groups, with the highest SES group reporting more emotional neglect than the middle and lowest SES groups. Likewise, support from significant others was found to have a significant effect with participants in the upper SES group reporting more support than those in the middle and lower class SES group. There were no differences across SES group of psychological distress, family support or friends support. The results indicate that although socioeconomic status is related to differences in emotional neglect and support from significant others during childhood; it does not significantly affect psychological distress or perceived support from family and friends.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore the association between childhood emotional neglect, peer support and psychological distress in young adults. Further the study examined the predictive role of childhood emotional neglect, peer support in psychological distress and the moderating role of peer support in the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and psychological distress.

The first hypothesis was that the childhood emotional will be significantly positively related to psychological distress in young adults. The results corroborate the hypothesized hypothesis and indicate that higher childhood emotional neglect experiences are related to higher psychological distress. The results indicate that lack of emotional needs in childhood can lead to emotional problems in adulthood. These results are consistent with Humphreys et al, (2020) who found that people who were emotionally neglected in childhood reported significantly higher level of depression, anxiety and emotional dysregulation during later life. The researcher discovered that the effects of emotional neglect are long-term on emotional functioning and mental health outcomes.

Likewise, Van Harmelen et al, (2020) found that adverse emotional experiences during childhood increases vulnerability to develop psychological distress through emotional regulation and social functioning. They found that those who had suffered childhood adversity were more likely to suffer emotional maladjustment in adolescents and adulthood. Moreover, Muller et al (2022) demonstrated that emotional neglect in childhood is linked to psychological maladjustment and low self-esteem.

The second hypothesis was that psychological distress in young adults would be significantly and negatively related to peer support. The results, however, do not support the proposed hypothesis as there is no significant direct relationship between peer support and psychological distress. Findings indicate that peer support may not be sufficient to directly decrease psychological distress in young adults. Childhood emotional neglect may be more influential on psychological well-being than other factors, such as coping styles and abilities to regulate emotions.

Alsubaie etal (2018) reported that university students' psychological distress was negatively

correlated with social support. The author, however, pointed out that social support can be effective in different ways, depending on the cultural context, characteristics of the person and the source of the support. This could be one reason why peer support was not found to be a significant direct predictor in the current study.

The third hypothesis was that childhood emotional neglect would be a strong predictor of psychological distress in young adults. Results are in line with the proposed hypothesis and suggest that emotional neglect is a strong predictor of psychological distress.

In support of these findings, Infurna et al, (2016) found that emotional neglect during childhood is associated with adverse emotional outcomes and psychological dysfunctioning in adulthood. Emotional neglect was associated with emotional problems and worse adjustment throughout adulthood. Likewise, Li et al, (2023) determined that childhood emotional neglect was a strong predictor of psychological distress, even when demographic and environmental factors were controlled. According to their results, emotional neglect has long-term effects on psychological outcomes.

The fourth hypothesis was that peer support would be a moderating factor between childhood emotional neglect and psychological distress in young adults. The findings are consistent with the hypothesis proposed and indicate that the negative effect of emotional neglect is reduced with increased levels of support. These results are supported by Fritz et al, (2018) who found that social support is as resilience factor to reduce the impact of childhood adversity on psychological health. Adverse childhood experiences were associated with lower psychological difficulties in those with stronger support network.

Furthermore, Schulz et al. (2023) discovered that the association between childhood maltreatment and psychological problems. Participants with higher levels of support had more positive psychological outcomes than those with lower levels of support.

Based on the fifth hypothesis, socio-economic status, age and gender differences would be significant in childhood emotional neglect, peer support, and psychological distress among young adults. The proposed hypothesis is partially supported by the results. While the some study variables exhibits statistically significant variations in selected study variables across demographic

groups, while some variables do not show differences. These results imply that while demographic traits may effects people's developmental experiences and perceived social support. They appear to have little effect on psychological distress.

Assari et al. (2018) found similar findings that differences in mental health outcomes are related to demographic and socioeconomic factors, but that these differences are often modified by social and environmental factors. The study highlighted that a variety of interrelated factors rather than only demographic traits, influence psychological well-being.

The results underscore the need to examine the effects of childhood experiences and current social relationships in a combined manner instead of focusing on psychological distress as a product of one of these factors. Emotional experiences in early life can shape people's views on relationships and their need for and receptivity to others' help. Meanwhile, positive peer relationships can also offer much in terms of connection and emotional understanding. From this view, psychological health can be viewed in developmental and interpersonal contexts.

The findings of the present study have implications for psychological assessment and psychological support services. Emotional neglect in childhood will be better understood if greater awareness is given to this issue by psychologists and counselors in order to understand the background of individuals who are suffering from psychological problems. Likewise, interventions that promote healthy interpersonal relationships, emotional expression, and coping skills could be useful for those who are distressed. Schools can also help by fostering positive peer relationships and offering access to counseling. These strategies can assist people to learn healthier ways of coping with emotional challenges and interpersonal conflict.

The study has some limitations that need to be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of this study. In a cross-sectional design, the relationship between the variables cannot be determined and causal inferences cannot be made. In addition, the use of self-report instruments could have affected the responses due to differences in perception, recall, and disclosure of personal experiences among individuals. The characteristics of the sample could also restrict the generalizability of the results to other populations and cultural contexts. Longitudinal designs, larger and more varied samples, and other psychological and interpersonal factors can be employed in future research to increase understanding of these relationships.

In general, the current study adds to the knowledge base on childhood emotional neglect, peer support and psychological distress, highlighting the significance of developmental experiences and interpersonal relationships in psychological well-being. All these factors together may give a more holistic view of the emotional difficulties that people have and the possible influence of a supportive social relationship in their lives. These relationships can be further clarified by further research and inform psychological support and intervention strategies.

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