

Adolescent-Parent Communication as a Mediator of Adolescent Depression and Family Cohesion

Laura J. Finan, University of Delaware

Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine whether adolescent-mother communication mediates the relationship between adolescent depression and family cohesion. Extant literature has established a link between adolescent depression and family cohesion, but has not explored mediating variables, such as open communication between adolescents and their mothers. Surveys were administered to a sample of 1,034 adolescent boys and girls. Structural equation modeling was used to examine the mediational effect of communication on the relationship between depression and family cohesion. Results indicated that adolescent depression was negatively related to open communication. In turn, open communication was positively related to family cohesion. Moreover, communication partially mediated the relationship between adolescent depression and family cohesion. These findings highlight the need to explore mediational models when examining relationships between adolescent psychological health and family dynamics.

Sample

- 1,034 adolescents (53% girls; 58% Caucasian) from the Adolescent Adjustment Project (AAP)
- Adolescents' mean age = 16.14 (SD=.75)
- All participants attended a public high school in Delaware, Pennsylvania, or Maryland and 99% were in the 10th or 11th grade

Measures

Depression

The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children (CES-DC; Weissman, Orvaschell, & Padian, 1980) was used as an indicator of adolescent depression. Participants answered 20 questions on a scale ranging from 1 (*Not At All*) to 5 (*A Lot*) about their feelings during the past week (e.g., "I felt sad" and "It was hard to get started doing things"). There were four items in this scale that were reverse coded before analyses. This scale has been shown as reliable and valid within adolescent populations (Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, & von Eye, 1999). In this study a more parsimonious, shorter 11-item version of the scale was used. Previous research has demonstrated this scale version is reliable and to have a single factor structure, like the original scale (Carpenter et al., 1998).

Measures cont.

Cohesion

The Family Cohesion subscale of the Family Satisfaction Scale (FSS; Olson & Wilson, 1982) was used to measure adolescents' perceptions of satisfaction with connectedness or closeness with their family (e.g., "How close do you feel to the rest of your family?" and "The amount of time you spend with your family?"). The family cohesion subscale included 8-items with response options ranging from 1 (*Dissatisfied*) to 5 (*Extremely Satisfied*). This scale has previously demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity with adolescent samples (Cumsille & Epstein, 1994).

Communication

The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (Barnes & Olson, 2003) was used to measure communication between adolescents and their mothers. This scale has two subscales: open and problem communication. Response options ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Only the open communication subscale was used in the current study which assessed the freedom or openness of communication between adolescent and their mothers (e.g., "My mother is always a good listener" and "It is very easy for me to express all my true feelings to my mother"). Communication with fathers was not included due to low response from fathers in the data collection procedure. Previous research has demonstrated the validity of this measure (Barnes & Olson).

Procedure

Data were collected in the Spring of 2007 from seven public high schools in the Eastern United States. Consent forms and information about the study were mailed to parents prior to data collection. Parents were asked to contact the school if they did not want their child to participate. Adolescents were invited to participate and were asked to sign assent forms prior to participation in the study. The survey was administered by trained staff and took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Adolescents were compensated for their time with a movie pass. This study was approved by the University of Delaware's IRB.

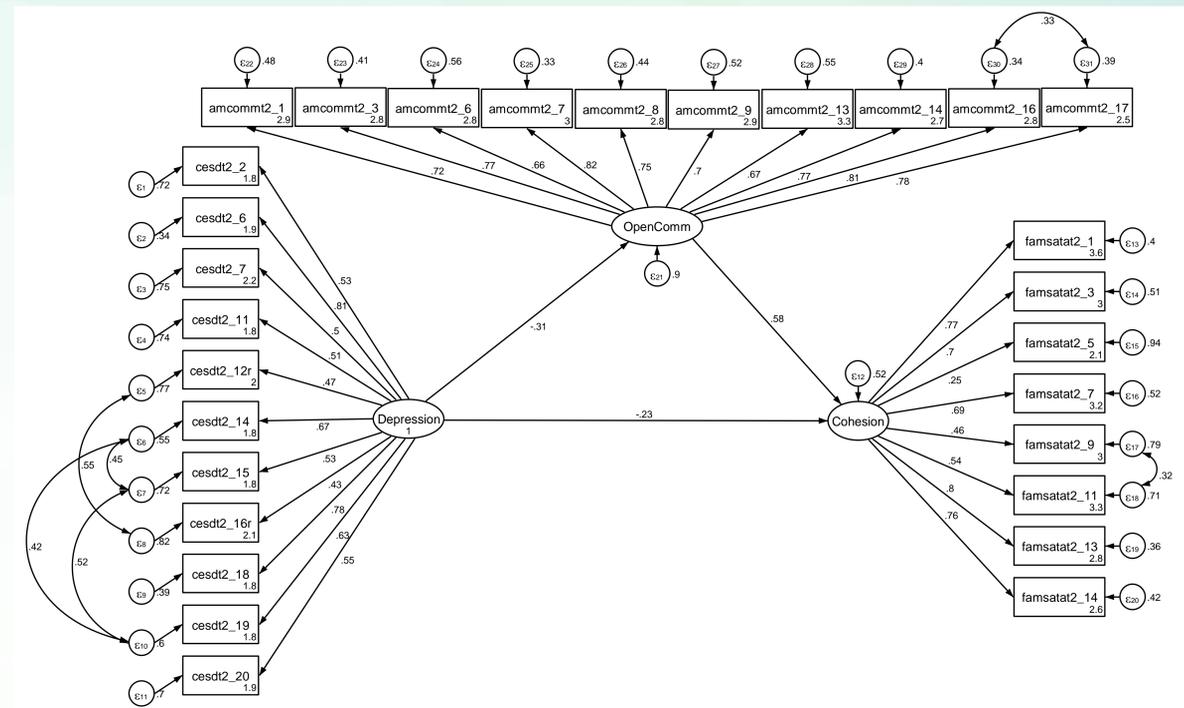


Figure 1. The relationships among depression, family cohesion, and adolescent-mother communication. Standardized regression coefficients are presented. All pathways between the depression, communication, and cohesion latent variables were significant at the $p < .001$ level.

Results

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to examine whether adolescent-mother open communication mediated the relationship between adolescent depression and family cohesion. The model predicting these relationships is displayed in Figure 1 and demonstrated good model fit ($X^2 = 937.88$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .04; CFI = .95; TLI = .95; SRMR = .05). The bootstrapping validation technique was used across 50 randomly drawn samples. Small standard error estimates indicated that there was little variability between the 50 randomly drawn samples and the final model. The range of the 95% confidence intervals was small, indicating that the values were close to that of the true population parameters.

Baron and Kenny's (1986) method for testing mediation was used. Depression was significantly, negatively related to cohesion ($\beta = -.39$). Depression was also significantly, negatively related to open communication ($\beta = -.31$). Finally, the relationship between depression and family cohesion was examined when communication was included in the model. Depression was still significantly and negatively related to satisfaction with family cohesion, but the size of the effect was reduced ($\beta = -.23$), indicating that open communication partially mediates the effect of depression on family cohesion.

Conclusions

Prior research has established a negative relationship between depression and family cohesion among adolescents (e.g., Sullivan & Miklowitz, 2010). However, few studies have examined other family level variables that may mediate this relationship. The present study sought to fill this gap in the literature by examining adolescent-mother open communication as a potential mediator of the relationship between adolescent depression and family cohesion. Findings indicated that adolescent depression was negatively related to adolescent mother communication and open communication was positively related to family cohesion. Importantly, open adolescent-mother communication was found to partially mediate the relationship between depression and family cohesion. These results highlight the importance of examining other family level variables when examining adolescent psychological health and family dynamics. Understanding how communication influences this relationship may be important for prevention, intervention, and treatment programs targeting adolescent depression.

*Supported by NIAAA K01AA015059

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