

DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS IN EARLY-MARRIED WOMEN: THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND MARITAL POWER

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Abstract

Child marriage or early marriage is defined as the type of marriage performed before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing. Turkish Population and Health Survey in 2018 demonstrated that 21% of women married before the age of 18, while 4% of them married before the age of 15. As can be observed from the statistics, early marriage is considered to be a serious problem, especially for girls in Turkey. Therefore, understanding the effects of early marriage on women seems to be an essential step to prevent young girls from getting married at an early age. Children are forced to take the adult roles before they are ready and have no control over their future; this situation paves the way for psychological problems such as depression. The variables that may predict depressive symptoms in early-married women were examined based on the relevant literature.

The aim of the present study is to examine the mediator role of perceived power in the relationship between social support and depressive symptoms in early-married women. The study sample consists of 97 women (between the ages of 19-30) who got married before the age of 18. The participants were given Demographic Information Form and The Multidimensional Scale of Social support, Couple Power Scale, and Depression subscale of Brief Symptom Inventory.

In model test results of the analysis, perceived power mediates the relationship between social support and depression in early-married women. According to the results, women who have more social support feel more power in the marital relationship, which in turn results with less depressive symptoms.

These findings of the current study suggest that social support and perceived power in a marital relationship play a significant role in depressive symptoms of early-married women. Along with the further studies, this study may help improve treatment strategies, which focus on social support and marital power for early-married women who present depressive symptoms.

Keywords: *Early marriage, social support, marital power, depressive symptoms.*

1. Introduction

Child marriage is considered formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and another child or an adult (UNICEF, 2021). Although child marriage is a problem that concerns both girls and boys, child marriage for girls is more common than for boys (Jensen & Thornton, 2013). Despite the legal regulations and the efforts of national and international organizations, child marriages continue to exist as a severe problem globally and in Turkey. This situation illustrates that the problem cannot be solved only through laws. It is seen that the social and cultural values that approve and legitimize child marriages are often more accepted than the laws (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu & Ergöçmen, 2012). According to Turkey Demographic and Health Survey data (TNSA, 2018), approximately one out of every four women in Turkey is married before eighteen. Understanding the effects of child marriage may be an essential step to prevent or reduce the number of young girls from getting married at an early age.

Marriage of young girls before the age of 18 have severe consequences for girls in terms of their position and responsibility within the home (Jensen & Thornton, 2003; Nour, 2009), the balance of power (McFarlane et al., 2016), negligence of personal development and freedom (Mikhail, 2002) and domestic violence (Kopelman, 2016). Children are forced to take the adult roles before they are ready, and having no control over their future can be a traumatic experience for children and paves the way for psychological problems (Warner, 2004). Taking responsibility at such a young age and not knowing what to do and how to do it can reduce self-esteem and thus cause emotional distress (Bhutto et al., 2013;

Kopelman, 2016; Warner, 2004; World Vision U.S, 2008). According to Soylu and Ayaz (2013), 46% of children who get married early are diagnosed with a mental disorder. The most common diagnoses are adjustment disorder and major depressive disorder in early-married women (Le Strat et al., 2011; Soylu & Ayaz, 2013). Researchers have identified significant links between social support and depression (Ibarra-Rovillard & Kuiper, 2011; Leung et al., 2007). The link between social support and depressive symptoms may be operating through secondary factors, and in the present study, the mediating role of perceived power on the relationship between social support and depressive symptoms will be investigated.

Social support is defined as the perception of attainable resources or supportive social ties (Barrera, 1986). When people think that they have enough resources and social relations with other people, they perceive social support (Chun & Lee, 2017). Many research indicated that social support has a significant role in increasing the perception of a sense of power (Bullers, 2001; Greenaway et al., 2015; Haslam et al., 2005). Power is the capacity to produce an intended effect in the relationship (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983), an ability to control or influence another person's actions (Ragsdale et al., 2009). According to Neff and Harter (2002), having less power in the relationship was linked to poorer psychological health. Perceiving power inequality in the relationship is associated with greater depression (Galliher et al., 1999).

In this regard, it is thought that it is crucial to address the direct and indirect relationships between social support, sense of power, and depression in early-married women in terms of contributing to the literature.

2. Method

2.1. Design and procedure

The study was employed a cross-sectional design. Prospective participants followed a link to information about the study and a further link to an online questionnaire. Participants were informed that consent was indicated by the completion and submission of the online questionnaire.

2.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 97 early married women between ages 19-30 (mean=25.34±3.07). Among these 97 women, 22 (22.7%) were primary school, 38 (39.2%) were middle school, 23 (23.7%) were high school and, 14 (14.4%) were university graduates. Thirty-seven early-married women (38.1 %) reported being exposed to physical violence throughout their marriage.

2.3. Instruments

Demographic Information Form: Participants completed questions concerning age and education level.

Couple Power Scale (Malatyali & Sunal, 2020): It was used to measure perceived relationship power.

The Multidimensional Scale of Social Support (MSPSS, Zimet et al., 1988): The scale was used to measure social support.

Brief Symptom Inventory (Şahin & Durak, 1994): The depression subscale was used to measure depressive symptoms.

3. Results

The relationships between social support, perceived power, and depressive symptoms were investigated using Pearson Correlation analysis. The variables were significantly related to depressive symptoms, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations, means and standard deviation (SD) for variables (N = 97).

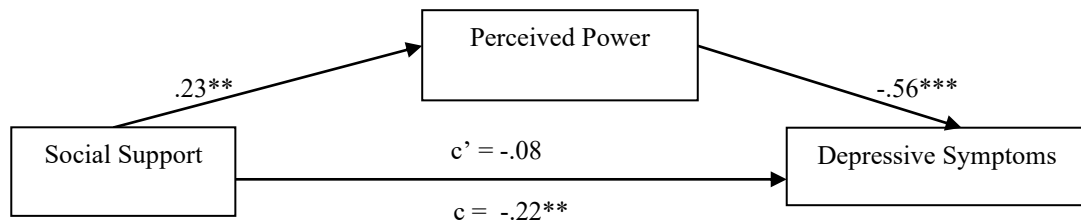
Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3
1. Social Support	52.32 (18.41)	1	-	-
2. Perceived power	44.90 (15.10)	.29**	1	-
3. Depressive symptoms	27.11 (14.87)	-.27**	-.61***	1

p<.01, *p<.001

Table 1 showed that social support ($r = .29, p < .01$) was significantly and positively correlated with depressive symptoms, while perceived power ($r = -.61, p < .001$) was significantly and negatively correlated with depressive symptoms among early-married women.

Meanwhile, the PROCESS macro model 4 developed by Hayes (2013) was used to determine whether perceived power moderate the relationship between social support and depressive symptoms among early-married women. In case that the 95% confidence interval did not include 0, an effect was considered significant.

Figure 1. The mediating role of perceived power in the relationship between social support and depressive symptoms.



The figure includes non-standardized betas. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The bootstrap analysis examined the mediator role of perceived power on the relationship between social support and depressive symptoms (Figure 1). According to the results, the total effect of social support and depressive symptoms ($B = -.221, SE = .079, p < .01, 95\% CI [-.379, -.062]$) was significant. In addition, social support was a significant predictor of perceived power ($B = .234, SE = .080, p < .01, 95\% CI [.074, .394]$). Perceived power ($B = -.566, SE = .083, p < .001, 95\% CI [-.731, -.399]$) had a significant direct effect on depressive symptoms. The bootstrap analysis demonstrated the significant mediator role of perceived power ($B = -.132, SE = .049, 95\% CI = [-.228, -.032]$). The mediational model explained 37.7% of the variance in depressive symptoms ($R^2 = .3778, F_{(2,94)} = 28.54, p < .001$). In other words, less social support resulted in less perceived power that predicted an increase in depressive symptoms.

4. Discussion

In the present study, the mediating role of perceived power on the relationship between social support and depressive symptoms was investigated. The analyses showed that perceived power was positively correlated with social support and negatively correlated with depressive symptoms.

This study also aimed to test the mediating effect of perceived power on the relationship between social support and depressive symptoms. The results revealed that perceived power fully mediated the effects of social support on depression. This showed that as social support increased, levels of perceived power escalated, which in turn led to lower levels of depressive symptoms. This result is essential regarding the central role of perceived power in dealing with depressive symptoms in early-married women. To deal with depressive symptoms, the negative effects of social support on depressive symptoms can be delivered by strengthening perceived power.

The literature has documented a positive association between social support and perceived power (Cai et al., 2021; Greenaway et al., 2015; Haslam et al., 2005). Social support increases individuals' perceived sense of power over a relationship with others (Chun and Lee, 2017). Relationship power is also an important predictor of depressive symptoms. Haley (1963) stated that depression occurs as a part of marital power struggle in marriage, and less powerful spouses have depression. Individuals with less relationship power perceive their spouses' threatening feelings such as anger more than they are (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). Individuals who think their relationships are unequal experience more distress, and as the inequality in the relationship increases, the stress level also increases (Sprecher, 1998). Those who benefit less from the relationship experience more anger and depression. Having less power in a romantic relationship is associated with more psychological symptoms for women. Various studies have reported that having less power is associated with lower self-esteem and depression (Galliher et al., 1999; Neff & Suizzo, 2006).

Despite the association between social support and depression, little is known about the factors that might mediate this relationship, making this study unique. This is a preliminary work for understanding the role of perceived relationship power and how perceived relationship power might require more research attention. Our findings may serve as a cue that would explain why it is functional to increase women's relationship power.

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