CAN SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS EXPLAIN PARENTAL OVERPROTECTION?

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Abstract

Background: Parental overprotection is a form of overparenting, parental behaviour that is not developmentally appropriate for the child's age. It may include the following: excessive physical and social contact from the parent, an exaggerated fear for the child, a tendency to protect them from minor dangers, and solving problems on their behalf. Factors predicting this behaviour are not well explored yet. Aim: This paper aims to determine whether socio-demographic factors (gender, age, marital status, education, monthly income, living area, and number of children) can predict parental overprotection. Methods: The participants of this study consisted of 738 parents (mean age 46.4, 80.42% female). Multiple regression analysis between parental overprotection and seven socio-demographic factors was conducted using Jamovi software. Results: Out of the seven variables, two were statistically significant – education (p = .006) and monthly household income (p = .029). Therefore, it can be expected that a lower level of education, as well as a lower average monthly household income, is associated with a higher level of overprotection. The regression model explained 4.6% of the variance of the dependent variable. The observed sociodemographic variables are only slightly related.

Keywords: Parental overprotection, socio-demographic factors.

1. Introduction

Parental overprotection, a form of overparenting, has garnered increasing research attention in recent years (Venard et al., 2023; Brenning et al., 2017). Overprotection involves behaviour that is inappropriate for a child's developmental level, such as excessive physical or social contact, overconcern, shielding the child from minimal risks, solving problems for them, or overreacting to minor challenges. Specific manifestations vary with the child's age (Brenning et al., 2017; Holmbeck et al., 2002).

In general, the socio-demographic factors are significantly related to parenting. For example, one study detected statistically significant relationships between all factors explored (age, gender, family income, place of residence, and level of education) and the parenting styles that parents adopt (Hadjicharalambous & Demetriou, 2020). However, less is known about how specifically overparenting is associated with various socio-demographic factors.

2. Objectives

The main purpose of the current study is to explore the relationship between parental overprotection and socio-demographic factors (gender, age, marital status, education, monthly income, living area, and number of children). Building on prior research, it is hypothesized that some socio-demographic factors may play a role in parental overprotection. The objective of the current study is to expand knowledge regarding the role of socio-demographic factors in prediction of parental overprotection in adolescents' parents. Studying these variables helps determine whether overprotection is linked to broader societal and demographic trends rather than purely individual traits.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The current study is a part of research project SafeSorry, which seeks to understand parenting in a changing social world in diverse cultures. The participants of the study consisted of 738 parents of adolescents, with a mean age of 46.4 years; the majority were female (80.42%). Secondary schools in Slovakia were contacted to distribute information to parents about the possibility of joining the research. Parents who agreed to participate completed an online questionnaire, with the option to be entered into a lottery to win a voucher redeemable at an online store. Data collection was conducted at the turn of years 2023 and 2024. The study received approval from the local university ethics committee under the number FIL005340/2023.

3.2. Measures

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design. The dependent variable, parental overprotection, was assessed using Multidimensional Overprotective Parenting Scale (MOPS) that was adapted from the child to the parents' perspective (Brenning et al., 2017; Kins & Soenens, 2013). The 10 items measure on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)". A higher score is equal to higher overprotection. The Cronbach alpha for this sample was $\alpha = 0.824$.

The independent variables, socio-demographic factors – gender, age, marital status, education, monthly income, living area, and number of children were chosen because they represent factors influencing parental behaviour, reflecting personal, economic, and environmental conditions that are supposed to shape the level of overprotection.

3.3. Statistical analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis between parental overprotection and seven socio-demographic factors was conducted using Jamovi software (version 2.4.14).

4. Results

The findings of the study reveal that out of the seven sociodemographic variables examined, only two — education ($p = .006$) and monthly household income ($p = .029$) — demonstrated a statistically significant association with parental overprotection (Table 1). Specifically, lower levels of education and lower monthly household incomes were linked to higher levels of overprotective behaviours. However, the regression model accounted for only 4.6% of the variance in overprotection, indicating that sociodemographic factors play a relatively limited role in explaining this complex parenting behaviour.

Table 1. Multiple linear regression analysis of independent variables.

Model coefficients – overprotection

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	24.7511	1.4391	17.1995	< .001
Gender	-1.0093	0.5399	-1.8694	0.062
Age	-0.4162	0.4021	-1.0350	0.301
Income	-0.2076	0.0946	-2.1939	0.029
Living area	-0.1273	0.2271	-0.5605	0.575
Education	-0.5401	0.1955	-2.7620	0.006
Marital status	0.0118	0.1796	0.0657	0.948
Number of children	-0.1121	0.1906	-0.5884	0.556

5. Discussion

In the current study, lower family income and lower education of parents were negatively correlated to parental overprotection. These results partially align with existing theoretical perspectives, suggesting that socio-demographic and/or socioeconomic factors may influence parenting styles (Hadjicharalambous & Demetriou, 2020; Bhaskar & Komal, 2015). However, a huge body of work shows the opposite, where lower socioeconomic status (income and education) is associated with lower levels of such parenting behaviours (Wang et al., 2016). Other studies also show no significant correlation between the two (Gagnon, 2019). Possible reasoning for the negative correlation in this study can be explained by

parental stress. Lower socioeconomic status is linked to higher stress levels (Ponnet, 2014), which are in turn linked to overprotective behaviours (Kim et al., 2024).

The current study indicates that socio-demographic factors play only a minor role in the development of overprotection, suggesting that it may be better explained by other factors, such as personality traits of parent and child (Segrin et al., 2013) or macro-contextual factors, such as social pressure perceived from one's environment (Zimmermann et al., 2022).

6. Implications for practice

The significant findings related to education and income provide a starting point for further research into socio-economic influences on parenting. However, the overall weak relationship observed between sociodemographic variables and overprotection underscores the multifaceted nature of parenting practices and highlights the need for further research to explore additional determinants.

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