

Emotional Intelligence and Self-Harming Behavior of Junior High School Students with Absentee Parents in a Catholic University

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ABSTRACT

Parental context significantly impacts a child's growth, whether physical, social, and emotional. Becoming a holistic being requires the integration of various life facets and emotions as one. Emotional intelligence is an essential psychological quality for individuals, especially to adolescents who face stress and pressure daily. Deficits in emotional regulation have been linked to self-harming behaviors. Self-harm encompasses a wide range of activities, and the intentionality, destructiveness, and conventionality of thoughts and acts of self-harm fall along a broad continuum (Vrouva et al., 2010). Hence, this study aimed to assess the emotional intelligence and self-harming behavior of junior high school students with absentee parents to create a program that promotes emotional resilience and self-harming prevention. One hundred sixty-eight stratified-randomly selected Junior high school students with absentee parents in a catholic university during the AY 2023-2024 were the respondents of the study. The result showed that the level of emotional intelligence of the respondents is generally very low. Meanwhile, the level of self-harming behavior of the respondents as a whole is no risk. Comparative analyses showed that there was no significant difference in the level of emotional intelligence of the respondents when they are grouped according to sex, family structure and birth order. There was no significant difference in the level of self-harming behavior of the respondents when they are grouped according to family structure birth order. A significant difference was found in sex. Lastly, the result showed a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and self-harm.

Keywords— emotional intelligence, self-harming behavior, Junior High School students with absentee Parents

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a holistic being requires the integration of various life facets and emotions as one. A person's behavior is influenced by emotional intelligence and consists of interconnected and cooperative social and emotional abilities, skills, and facilitators (Drigas & Papoutsis, 2019). Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a set of non-cognitive abilities, competencies, and skills that affect a person's capacity to successfully manage unparalleled challenges from the environment. It comprises meta-components such as intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, and general mood (Bar-On, 2006). These components emphasize the pivotal role of emotions in one's interpersonal relationships (Ain et al., 2021). Moreover, EI is an essential psychological quality for individuals, especially adolescents who face stress and pressure daily. Those who lack the skill to cope with these stresses have a higher chance of acting out due to a lack of mental well-being (Jha, 2021).

A lack of mental well-being may be manifested in negative thoughts and self-destructive behavior such as self-harming. Self-harm encompasses a wide range of activities, and the intentionality, destructiveness, and conventionality of thoughts and acts of self-harm fall along a broad continuum (Vrouva et al., 2010). Parental context significantly impacts a child's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual growth. As primary caregivers, parents play a crucial role in children's emotional development (American Psychological Association [APA], 2009). Filipino children with absentee parents experience difficulty in development. Children with absent parents are likelier to show self-harming behavior (Fu et al., 2017). The risk of self-harming behavior may be attributed to an individual's environment, thoughts, and actions. It has been noted that low levels of emotional intelligence constitute a higher risk of self-harming. Emotional intelligence provides a protective impact against self-harming behavior, which at times can lead to suicidal tendencies (Halicka-Malowska et al., 2021).

Relative to research, in the Philippines, where lower rates of suicide than in other developed or developing nations, the trend has been rising. Suicide attempts in the form of self-harming among adolescents increased significantly from 12.9% to 17%, according to Lagman et al. (2021), and it was found in Alayon's (2021) study about depression and suicidal ideation (including self-harming) that emotional intelligence has a significant influence. In the local setting, the researcher, as a guidance associate, noted observations among students with absentee parents during the counseling sessions that often display emotional and moral dilemmas that lead to self-harming behavior, such as cutting and scratching. These observations on such a special population are noteworthy for an effective intervention.

Hence, this study assessed the emotional intelligence and self-harming behavior of junior high school students with absentee parents. The researcher further investigated the influence of emotional intelligence on self-harming behavior. The findings of this study served as baseline data for the guidance office in creating Project Holistic Opportunity Program Empowering Students with Absentee Parents (HOPE): Building Emotional Resilience and Self-harming Prevention to help junior high school students with absentee parents in their emotional growth and development.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This research paper theorizes that emotional intelligence influences the self-harming behavior of individuals. This means that a person who knows how to manage one's emotions, understands the feelings of others, has a high tolerance for stress, and is flexible to changing situations will be less likely to perform self-harming behavior. This study will be anchored on the Emotional Intelligence Model of Bar-On (2006).

This model is regarded as a mixed model since it considers how emotions interact with personality traits. According to the paradigm, emotional intelligence is a collection of interconnected emotional and social competencies, skills, and facilitators that impact how well we comprehend and express ourselves, relate to others, deal with strong emotions, control our impulses, and adapt to change and solving problems of a personal or social nature. Specifically, the model highlighted how individuals function well and maintain well-being by adapting in a certain way to one's environment.

The model comprises five key components: intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, and general mood (Bar-On, 2006). These components have contributing factors to managing one's emotions and protection against self-harming. Self-harming behavior is often viewed as a way to relieve heavy emotional baggage. This emotional baggage may be influenced by factors like childhood trauma and intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. The model suggests that having an adequate and balanced level of emotional intelligence may limit self-harming behavior.

Relative to the study, the Emotional Intelligence Model proposed by Bar-On can serve as a protective tool against self-harming behavior. Solid intrapersonal abilities may help people control their emotions in difficult situations, potentially lowering their propensity for self-harming actions. Additionally, solid interpersonal abilities can help people deal with interpersonal difficulties more successfully, reducing the chance of engaging in self-harming behaviors. A high level of adaptability may also provide people with coping mechanisms other than self-harm because it relates to creating efficient solutions to intrapersonal and interpersonal problems, maintaining emotional stability in dynamic environments, and adapting to changing circumstances. In high-stress circumstances, stress management promotes healthy coping techniques and potentially lessens the risk of self-harming behaviors. Lastly, the general mood domain promotes happiness, positivism, and a good attitude toward life. As they maintain a sense of overall well-being, people in a good mood may be less likely to participate in self-harming activities. Through this model, the researcher may note the influence of emotional intelligence on the self-harming behavior of adolescents.

METHODS

The Junior High School students with absentee parents in a Catholic university were assessed for their level of emotional intelligence and self-harming behavior in this descriptive, comparative, correlational study. One hundred sixty-eight stratified-randomly selected Junior high school students with absentee parents in a catholic

university during the Academic Year 2023-2024 responded to the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory: Youth Version and Self-Harm Inventory for Adolescents by Vrouva et al. (2010). Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed that the variables are not normally distributed, thus nonparametric tests such as Mann Whitney U test, Kruskal Wallis, and Spearman rank correlation are used to answer the inferential questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Levels of emotional intelligence of Junior High school students with absentee parents in a Catholic university

The result shows that the level of emotional intelligence of Junior High school students with absentee parents in a catholic university is generally very low. A very low emotional intelligence would indicate that a person has underdeveloped emotional and social capacity, with considerable room for improvement (Bar-On & Parker, 2000). While low emotional intelligence does not necessarily equate to an overall impairment in emotional and social skills, it can indicate a need for further development in this area. This is particularly relevant for junior high students with absentee parents in a Catholic school setting. These students may struggle to understand and identify their emotions, leading to difficulties managing behavior. Since emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in shaping behavior and personality development, providing support and resources for these students becomes even more important. Junior high school students in a catholic university may struggle with key emotional skills such as self-awareness, assertiveness, and managing negative thought patterns. They might also have difficulty interpreting social cues accurately and understanding perspectives different from their own.

Pressingly, the result of the study may imply that Junior High school students with absentee parents in a Catholic university may display poor social skills. Individuals with weak social skills may struggle with active listening and demonstrating empathy or understanding towards others' feelings. This lack of skill can hinder their ability to build positive relationships and succeed in various aspects of life. Moreover, those with very low emotional intelligence would poorly manage and control emotions. The respondents may struggle to manage their emotions effectively, leading to difficulties coping with stressful situations. This can manifest as a low tolerance for stress and impulsive reactions, hindering their ability to regulate responses and maintain composure during challenging life changes. Furthermore, junior high school students with absentee parents may struggle to validate their emotions, be inflexible in changing situations, and be unable to identify and solve problems effectively.

The very low emotional intelligence of the respondents may be due to many factors. These include genetics and environmental influences such as upbringing, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. Adverse childhood experiences, including neglect, abuse, or exposure to violence, can significantly impact emotional development. While some people might be naturally predisposed towards higher emotional intelligence, various experiences can hinder its development. The absence of a parent can be one of the contributing factors to this. Children learn about emotions through interactions with caregivers. Absentee parents may be unable to provide consistent guidance and support in identifying, understanding, and managing emotions. This lack of early emotional learning can hinder development in later stages. In addition, parents form childhood emotional experiences. These experiences may be shaped by emotion-related traits, such as how children interpret and regulate their own and others' emotions, accounting for one's emotional intelligence. Adolescents may struggle to learn essential emotional skills such as empathy, perspective-taking, and problem-solving without parental guidance. They may also experience difficulties in building trust and forming healthy relationships. The lack of a secure attachment figure can lead to feelings of insecurity, abandonment, and low self-esteem, further hindering emotional development.

B. Level of self-harming behavior of Junior High school students with absentee parents in a Catholic university

The study's findings suggest that Junior High School students with absentee parents in a catholic university did not exhibit a risk for self-harming behaviors. This could indicate that the participants never engaged in self-harming acts such as cutting, scratching, burning, biting, or head banging (Vrouva et al., 2010) or did so rarely.

This could be a positive indicator that students with absentee parents, despite the absences of one or both of their parents, can do away with self-harming behaviors. It is possible that the specific environment of a catholic university, with its emphasis on values and support systems, may provide these students with resources and a sense of community that helps them cope with the challenges of having an absent parent.

Numerous factors can contribute to self-harming behaviors in adolescents. One significant risk factor identified by research is exposure to violence and abuse. Witnessing or experiencing violence can be incredibly traumatic for adolescents, leaving lasting emotional scars. This trauma can manifest in self-harming behaviors to cope with overwhelming emotions, feelings of helplessness, or a shattered sense of security. However, the result of the study suggests a different possibility. The low reported risk of self-harm in this group might indicate that the respondents either had not witnessed or experienced violence or if they did, it was not a significant enough trigger for them to resort to self-harm. The emphasis on values and fostering a strong sense of community, potentially characteristic of a catholic university, could contribute to a reduced prevalence of bullying – a known risk factor for self-harm in adolescents. This, combined with the possible presence of robust support systems within the university environment, might explain the observed lack of self-harm risk among these students despite having absentee parents.

Moreover, distressing emotions and a sense of isolation are some of the factors associated with adolescents' self-harming. These feelings are often heightened during adolescence due to life transitions and pressures. Junior High School students with absentee parents in a catholic university might not fully capture these emotional factors because of the supportive environment of the university. This could potentially buffer the impact of isolation and offer outlets for managing distressing emotions. Furthermore, self-harm can manifest through generalized active thoughts, not necessarily translating into actions. This could explain why some respondents, despite their thoughts, did not exhibit self-harming behaviors. While this highlights a potential factor, the prevalence of self-harming behaviors remains a significant concern.

Generally, the result of the study might imply that the Catholic university environment might offer unique protective factors. The university may provide a strong support system through counselors, peer support groups, or faculty who fill the void left by absent parents. Additionally, the religious teachings and emphasis on values might instill a sense of purpose and belonging, potentially reducing feelings of isolation associated with self-harm. Furthermore, the respondents might have developed close social connections with peers or mentors within the university. These positive relationships could act as a buffer against self-harm tendencies.

The overall result of the study differs from those of Monotilla-Baloco (2015), who explored suicidal tendencies (including self-harm) in adolescents from Negros. The study finds an average prevalence of self-harm in adolescents. Looking at the demographic variables explored in the study, female respondents display mild self-harming behavior, while males display no risk. A mild result would indicate that respondents have done mild self-harming behavior. Female respondents may have engaged in self-harming behavior more than once. This result is supported by the study of Wilkinson et al. (2022), which states that non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is more prevalent in females aged 16–19. Similarly, Stallard et al. (2013) suggest females may be more prone to developing self-harm thoughts.

C. Differences in the Level of Emotional Intelligence of the Respondents According to Demographics

Mann Whitney U test was used to determine the significant difference in the level of emotional intelligence of the respondents when they were grouped according to sex and family structure. In contrast, Kruskal Wallis was used when grouped according to birth order. There was no significant difference in the level of emotional intelligence of the respondents when they were grouped according to sex [$U=3002.500$, $p=0.108$], family structure [$U=3150.500$, $p=0.433$], and birth order [$\chi^2(3)=5.028$, $p=0.170$]. The results adhere to the hypothesis of the study. It indicates that regardless of sex, family structure, and birth order, the level of emotional intelligence of the respondents is the same.

Sex differences have emerged as a prominent interdisciplinary research area, consistently drawing insights from various fields (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). Based on the result of the study, it can be noted that both male and female respondents display the same level of capacity for understanding emotions,

gaining emotional knowledge, and controlling emotions. It can be implied that regardless of sex, respondents display the same level of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence flourishes in supportive family environments. Children raised in families where feelings are acknowledged and addressed are more likely to develop this crucial skill (Sanchez-Nuñez et al., 2020).

Exploring the emotional intelligence of the respondents, it was found that whether they came from intact or non-intact family structures, they displayed the same level of emotional intelligence. This finding might be explained by the potential for the school environment to act as a buffer. If the school successfully cultivates a strong Catholic climate, it could create a sense of belonging and support that fills the gap left by absent parents. Essentially, the school might function as a "second home" and provide a parental role model for these students, fostering emotional intelligence development. Birth order is one of the demographic variables explored in the study. A person's ordinal position within the family system has been presented as a contributing factor in personality development. The study revealed that regardless of the ordinal position (eldest, middle child, youngest child, and only child), the level of emotional intelligence of the respondents is the same.

Overall, the result of the study might imply that despite the influence of the variable sex, family structure, and birth order, the level of emotional intelligence of the respondents did not differ significantly due to the unique environment of the Catholic university that might act as a moderating influence. The university prioritizes social-emotional learning programs or fosters a strong sense of community within the school, leading to a more uniform development of emotional intelligence across different student backgrounds.

The result of the study is supported by the study of Fischer et al. (2018), who studied gender differences in emotion perception and self-reported emotional intelligence. It was found that there is no significant difference in emotional intelligence for both genders. Another support was found in the study of Wapaño (2021) that seeks to determine whether gender predicts emotional intelligence among adolescents, and the results revealed that gender does not explain any of the variance of emotional intelligence. Both studies suggest that men and women may possess similar emotional intelligence capacities. While the current study found no significant difference in emotional intelligence by sex, it is important to acknowledge the existence of mixed findings in this area. Bar-On (2006) revealed that females appear to have stronger interpersonal skills than males, implying that women are more aware of emotions, demonstrate more empathy, relate better interpersonally, and are more socially responsible than men.

D. Differences in the Level of Self-harming Behavior of the Respondents According to Demographics

Mann Whitney U test was used to determine the significant difference in the level of self-harming behavior of the respondents when they were grouped according to sex and family structure. In contrast, Kruskal Wallis was used when grouped according to birth order. The result shows that there was no significant difference in the level of self-harming behavior of the respondents when they were grouped according to family structure [$U=3371.500$, $p=0.969$] and birth order [$\chi^2(3) = 6.706$, $p=0.082$]. The hypothesis was true in this regard. Meanwhile, there was a significant difference in the level of self-harming behavior of the respondents when they were grouped according to sex [$U=2274.000$, $p=0.000$], rejecting the hypothesis. Female students have a significantly higher risk than male students.

Self-harm encompasses a broad range of deliberate acts that inflict physical injury on oneself. These behaviors can manifest in various ways, including scratching, biting, hitting oneself or objects, and pulling out hair (Vrouva et al., 2010). Notably, the severity and underlying intent behind self-harm can differ significantly from person to person. The result of the study may indicate that junior high school students with absentee parents in a catholic university, regardless of its family structure and birth orders, display the same risk for self-harming behavior.

The current study found no significant difference in the level of self-harming behavior between individuals from intact and non-intact families. This suggests that family structure alone may not strongly determine self-harming behavior in this population. The result might imply that the school climate might be a factor in this. As a catholic university, the school might strive to foster a supportive atmosphere, offer dedicated mental health resources through various platforms and programs, or emphasize social-emotional learning. These

elements, combined with the potential for religious teachings and values to instill a sense of purpose and belonging, could mitigate the potential negative effects of non-intact family on emotional well-being and self-harm risk of junior high school students with absentee parents.

In addition, the result of the study also shows that birth order, whether eldest, middle child, youngest, or only child, does not influence the self-harming behavior of the respondents. The result may imply that individual tendencies associated with birth order might be less pronounced in this population. The junior high students with absentee parents, regardless of being eldest, middle, youngest, or only children, experience a more equalizing environment that mitigates the potential challenges often linked to specific birth orders, just like for middle children, who might typically struggle for attention, might find a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere within the school community.

The study also revealed that there is a significant difference in the level of self-harming behavior and sex, highlighting females to have a higher risk than male respondents. Females are known to be more expressive than males and are likely to report self-harming behavior more readily. Meanwhile, males often tend to suppress their emotions and underreport self-harming behavior. Differences in help-seeking behaviors between genders may also contribute to the observed disparity. Females may be more likely to disclose self-harm behaviors due to societal norms and expectations. At the same time, males may be less likely to seek help due to stigma and pressure to maintain a strong, independent image.

Regarding family structure, the result of the study is different from the study conducted by Maepa and Ntshalintshali (2020), which revealed that Child-headed and single-parent households reported higher risk-taking and self-harm behavior. In addition, Wang et al. (2022) revealed that adolescents with low-income family functioning are positively associated with non-suicidal self-injury (including self-harming).

Moreover, adolescents from families with balanced cohesion (having parental figures) and flexibility are less likely to participate in self-harm (Bahr, 2019). These contrasting findings highlight the need for further research considering the complex interplay between family structure, socioeconomic status, parenting practices, and emotional intelligence development. The research found mixed results regarding self-harming and birth order, such as the study of Kircaldy et al. (2009) on birth order and self-injurious and suicidal behavior among adolescents. The study found out the likelihood of middle children engaging in suicidal and self-destructive behavior was found to be correlated with birth order. Comparisons of birth order groups within gender found no significant differences in suicidal behavior between male birth positions; however, among females, middle children were much more likely to have attempted suicide.

E. Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Self-harming Behavior of the Respondents

Spearman rank correlation was used to determine the significant relationship between the emotional intelligence and self-harming behavior of Junior high school students with absentee parents. There was a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and self-harm [$r_s(166) = -0.252, p=0.000$]. This result rejected the hypothesis formulated.

A person's emotional intelligence influences their engagement with self-harming behavior. This would mean that individuals with higher emotional intelligence may be less susceptible to self-harm. Emotional intelligence equips individuals with skills to identify, manage, and express their emotions in healthy ways (Bar-On, 2006), potentially reducing the urge to use self-harm as a coping mechanism. Additionally, emotional intelligence fosters empathy, allowing individuals to connect with others and feel less isolated (Bar-On, 2006), which can be a protective factor against self-harm. Finally, skills like self-awareness and problem-solving associated with emotional intelligence can empower individuals to navigate stressful situations more effectively, potentially decreasing the likelihood of resorting to self-harm.

The current study's findings align with research by Alayon (2021), who investigated depression and suicidal ideation among Filipino college students. The study explored emotional intelligence as a potential psychosocial predictor of depression, a condition often linked to self-harming behaviors. Interestingly, Alayon's results revealed a significant inverse relationship between emotional intelligence and both depression

and suicidal ideation. This suggests that higher emotional intelligence may serve as a protective factor against these mental health concerns, potentially reducing the risk of self-harm.

In addition, the study by Halicka-Maslowska et al. (2021) also found that higher levels of EI were associated with positive outcomes. Individuals with higher EI reported lower levels of sadness, anxiety, and impulsivity, alongside higher self-worth and empathy. This suggests that emotional intelligence may act as a protective buffer against negative emotions and impulsivity, potentially reducing the risk of self-harm. Moreover, Dominguez-Garcia and Fernandez-Berrocal (2018) revealed that high emotional intelligence plays a vital role in protecting against suicidal behavior. This result is parallel to that of Okello and Aomo (2018), highlighting a significant relationship between emotional intelligence, self-confidence, accurate self-assessment, and suicidal behavior among secondary school students.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study present a complex interplay between emotional intelligence and self-harm behavior among junior high school students with absentee parents. While the respondents exhibited notably low levels of emotional intelligence, it is surprising that they were classified as no risk for self-harm.

This unexpected outcome suggests that the relationship between emotional intelligence and self-harm behavior is not straightforward. It is possible that other protective factors, such as the presence of supportive relationships with extended family, teachers, or peers, may have mitigated the negative impacts of absentee parenting and reduced the risk of self-harm. In addition, respondents may have developed alternative coping strategies, such as academic achievement or extracurricular involvement, and seeking help from their guidance counselors to manage emotional challenges without resorting to self-harm.

No risk for self-harming among the respondents could be a positive indicator that students with absentee parents, despite the absences of one or both of their parents, can do away with self-harming behaviors. It is possible that the specific environment of a catholic university, with its emphasis on values and support systems, may provide these students with resources and a sense of community that helps them cope with the challenges of having an absent parent.

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