

From childhood psychological maltreatment to fear of happiness: Exploring the serial mediation of external shame and family communication

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Childhood psychological maltreatment
Fear of happiness
External shame
Family communication

ABSTRACT

Background: It is known that childhood psychological maltreatment has an adverse influence on the present and future lives of individuals as well as on their past lives. Individuals exposed to psychological maltreatment avoid positive emotions throughout their lives, and their fear of happiness is triggered.

Objective: Considering that other factors may have an effect on this link, this study aims to examine the mediating role of external shame and family communication in the relationship between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness.

Method: In total 390 Turkish individuals participated from 51 different cities in Türkiye. Research data were analyzed by structural equation modeling.

Results: The findings of the study indicated that external shame and family communication played a full mediating role in the relationship between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness.

Conclusions: The results revealed that external shame and family communication are important variables to change the beliefs about the happiness of individuals who are exposed to psychological maltreatment. All findings were discussed and interpreted in detail in light of the literature.

1. Introduction

Positive psychology, which emerged under the influence of post-modernist thought in the twenty-first century, emphasizes the strengths, positive emotions, and potential of individuals. Particularly in recent years, numerous studies have been conducted on positive psychology, which aims to maximize human functionality (Seligman et al., 2005) and make individuals realize positive life events (Gable & Haidt, 2005). In these studies, wellbeing, one of the concepts of positive psychology, is frequently included.

Wellbeing is defined as how individuals evaluate themselves in interaction with others in terms of physiological, psychological, and social aspects (Kiefer, 2008). In other words, wellbeing is living a balanced and satisfying life in physical, mental, and social areas. Happiness, which is expressed as one of the components of wellbeing in the literature, is another indicator of mental health (Chng et al., 2022; Linley et al., 2009). According to Diener et al. (2009), happiness is defined as the balance of positive and negative emotions in life.

Happiness, which varies according to how an individual perceives life events (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998), may be explained as the satisfaction obtained as a result of experiencing a lot of positive emotions in life. On the other hand, the concept of fear of happiness was introduced in a recent study on happiness (Joshani, 2013).

Fear of happiness is defined as the belief that being happy may have negative consequences (Joshani & Weijers, 2014). In the literature, it is stated that happiness is a frightening feeling, therefore being overly happy should be avoided (Joshani, 2014), and being overly happy can attract a bad event (Mauss et al., 2011). Gilbert et al. (2012) also reported that individuals find positive emotions scary and develop irrational beliefs by opposing happiness. All these results necessitated the investigation of variables that predict fear of happiness. In this framework, recent studies in the literature emphasize that individuals' negative experiences in life can reveal their fear of happiness (e.g., Arslan, 2023; Demir, 2023). In these studies, it has been stated that childhood stories may trigger happiness. According to these studies, it has been specified that individuals who are punished after an activity enjoyed in

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107425>

Received 10 May 2023; Received in revised form 4 November 2023; Accepted 29 December 2023

Available online 5 January 2024

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childhood may approach positive emotions more cautiously. Therefore, family life may be mentioned among the factors that cause individuals to experience fear of happiness. There are also studies in the literature that support the importance of family life in this regard. For instance, the findings obtained in the study of Şar et al. (2019) demonstrated that experiencing emotional neglect and physical abuse in childhood triggers the fear of happiness. Similarly, in another study by Lazić and Petrović (2020), it was reported that individuals subjugated to childhood psychological maltreatment avoid happiness. In a recent study by Arslan (2022), it was revealed that negative parental behaviors may increase the fear of happiness. All these research findings corroborate the idea that one of the predictors of individuals' fear of happiness may be psychological maltreatment.

According to Hart et al. (2022), psychological maltreatment is a problem that arises as a result of parents rejecting their children, making them feel unworthy, and depriving them of love. Considering the recent report of the World Health Organization for the year 2022 that approximately 300 million children in the world are subjugated to psychological maltreatment by their families or caregivers (WHO, 2022), it can be said that this is a universal problem. Due to this problem, it has been emphasized in the latest studies that individuals may struggle to experience positive emotions such as happiness in adulthood (Genç & Arslan, 2022), may experience mental and physical problems (Turhan, 2022; Watts et al., 2023), and their mental health may be harmed (Satıcı & Okur, 2022). All these research findings demonstrate that exposure to psychological maltreatment during childhood may lead to long-term problems.

1.1. External shame and family communication as the mediators

Individuals exposed to psychological maltreatment experience negativity in many ways, not only in childhood but also in adulthood (Hart et al., 2002). Among these negativities, an example may be given that psychological maltreatment can predict external shame. External shame is described as the negative belief that individuals have about other people's perceptions of themselves (Gilbert, 1998). Individuals with a high level of external shame focus too much on other people's thoughts about them and constantly think that others have negative thoughts and beliefs about them (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Lewis (2003) states that due to external shame, individuals struggle to be evaluated positively and generally tend to hide. So, this may be an obstacle to individuals experiencing positive emotions such as happiness. In the literature, it has been revealed that past traumatic experiences trigger external shame (Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010). Similarly, in the study of Cunha et al. (2012), it was reported that negative past experiences increase the level of external shame in individuals. Based on the results of this study, external shame could be explained as the shame individuals experience from others. Especially in individuals who are deemed inadequate by their parents during childhood and whose negative characteristics are emphasized, external shame behaviors can be encountered frequently.

Apart from external shame, family relations and family communication among individuals who are exposed to psychological maltreatment may also be adversely influenced. Taipale (2019) defines family communication as the whole of verbal and nonverbal responses that ensure harmony and problem solving among family members. In the literature, the importance of healthy family communication is emphasized in a strong family relationship (Segrin & Flora, 2005). It may be thought that the relationship that individuals establish with their parents has an impact on family communication. Previous studies have revealed that those who have experienced psychological abuse have poor family communication (e.g., Burgess & Conger, 1978; Gaudin et al., 1996). Similarly, in a recent study by Ümmet et al. (2023), it was reported that psychological maltreatment significantly predicted family communication. So, this may play a role in seriously weakening individuals' psychological health by preventing them from experiencing

positive emotions. All of these research findings demonstrate that individuals who experience psychological maltreatment at the hands of their parents or other caregivers may have impaired family communication.

1.2. The present study

As mentioned earlier, individuals exposed to psychological maltreatment or negative experiences in childhood may also experience problems in adulthood (Hart et al., 2002; Watts et al., 2023). Especially individuals who are victims of psychological maltreatment may avoid positive emotions such as happiness (Arslan, 2022; Şar et al., 2019). In other words, one of the predictors of fear of happiness may be psychological maltreatment. There may be other variables that predict the fear of happiness other than psychological maltreatment. In this context, the author(s) of this study first predicted that external shame may play a mediating role in the relationship between psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness. This prediction is based on the theory of mind (Gilbert, 2003). This approach may help readers make sense of ideas (Coskun et al., 2022). For instance, with this theory, individuals can make sense of external shame. According to the theory of mind, individuals' experience of external shame includes thoughts about what others think or believe about them (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Therefore, individuals who have been abused by their parents or caregivers may experience external shame. With this, having the thought that their parents or caregivers have negative feelings and thoughts about them may also cause external shame. So, this may prevent individuals from experiencing positive emotions and having a healthy mental structure.

Secondly, the present study suggests that exposure to psychological maltreatment predicts external shame, which may predict fear of happiness through poor family communication. Because it is stated in the literature that individuals with external shame have difficulty communicating with close people around them (Crane et al., 2020). This situation may also have a negative reflect on family communication. Based on all these studies and assumptions, this cross-sectional research aims to examine the serial multiple mediating roles of external shame and family communication in the relationship between psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness. In accordance with this purpose, it is important to examine psychological maltreatment (Arslan, 2023; Satıcı & Okur, 2022) and fear of happiness (Jordan et al., 2021; Yıldırım & Belen, 2018), which are expressed as important concepts in terms of people's mental health in the literature. In this context, external shame and family communication variables, which are thought to play a mediating role in the relationship between these concepts, are based on a theoretical framework and previous research. Thus, this research will contribute to the mental health literature. Except for this, the absence of any research in the literature examining childhood psychological maltreatment, external shame, family communication, and fear of happiness demonstrates the importance of this research. Lastly, this research will also benefit practitioners working in the field of mental health by revealing the predictors of fear of happiness. In this regard, considering the purpose of this research, answers are sought to the following research questions:

RQ1. Does external shame have a mediating role in the relationship between psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness?

RQ2. Does family communication have a mediating role in the relationship between psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness?

RQ3. Is there a serial mediating role of external shame and family communication in the relationship between psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness?

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The Yıldız Technical University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee granted ethical compliance certification (Report Number = 20230402009, Verification Code = 24c78) before the research commenced. In addition, in all stages of the study, the research adhered to the ethical principles stated in the 1975 Helsinki Declaration, which were updated. The convenience sampling method was preferred in this research. This study’s online data collection was done using a Google form, and participants were made aware that they could opt out of the study at any time, ensuring their voluntary participation in the research. This Google form link was distributed via public social media groups via the social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Whatsapp, etc.) of the author(s). Participants who received the link were asked to fill out the online form, and in this process, informed consent was obtained from the participants before starting the research. No fee was paid to the participants who took part in the research voluntarily. Average age of respondents: 28.47 years. The sample consisted of 213 females and 177 males, ranging in age from 19 to 73 years (SD = 6.21 years).

The groups of the participants’ educational status are as follows in descending order: university (N = 282, 72.3%), doctorate (N = 58, 14.8%), master degree (N = 33, 8.5%), high school and below (N = 17, 4.4%). The employment status of the participants is as follows: university students (N = 220, 56.4%), private sector workers (N = 88, 22.6%), public sector workers (N = 66, 16.9%), unemployed (N = 16, 4.1%). The socioeconomic status of the participants is as follows: middle (N = 288, 73.8%), low (N = 55, 14.1%), and high (N = 47, 12.1%). Having received psychological assistance in the past status of the participants is as follows: Received (N = 111, 28.5%) and not received (N = 279, 71.5%).

2.2. Measures

Psychological Maltreatment Questionnaire (PMQ). The scale developed by Arslan (2015, 2017) aims to measure individuals’ subjective experiences of perceived negative treatment from their parents. The one-dimensional scale is of the four-point rating (1 = Never; 4 = Always). It consists of 12 items (e.g., “My parents give me offensive, hurtful nicknames”). The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 12 and the highest score is 48. Increasing scores indicate an increase in the psychological maltreatment perceived by the individual. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.87. In the present study, the scale showed good reliabilities ($\alpha = 0.88$, $\omega = 0.89$, $\lambda_6 = 0.89$).

Fear of Happiness Scale (FHS). The scale developed by Joshanloo (2013) has been adapted into Turkish by Yildirim and Aziz (2017). It aims to measure the level of fear experienced by individuals when they are happy. The one-dimensional scale is a seven-point Likert type (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree). It consists of five items (e.g., “Joy is followed by sadness”). The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 5 and the highest score is 35. Increasing scores indicate that the fear of happiness increases. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.86. In the present study, the scale showed acceptable reliabilities ($\alpha = 0.92$, $\omega = 0.92$, $\lambda_6 = 0.91$).

Others as Shame Scale (OaSS). The scale developed by Matos et al. (2015) has been adapted into Turkish by Sancı and Deniz (2020). It aims to measure individuals’ levels of shame. The one-dimensional scale is of the five-point Likert type (0 = Never; 4 = Always). It consists of eight items (e.g., “People see me as unimportant compared to others”). The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 0 and the highest score is 32. Increasing scores indicate an increase in the embarrassment experienced by others. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.88. In the present study, the scale showed good reliabilities ($\alpha = 0.93$,

$\omega = 0.93$, $\lambda_6 = 0.93$).

Family Communication Scale (FCS). The scale developed by Geçer and Yildirim (2023) aims to measure the level of communication within families. The one-dimensional scale is of the four-point rating (1 = Strongly disagree; 4 = Strongly agree). It consists of six items (e.g., “I enjoy spending time with my family”). The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 6 and the highest score is 24. Increasing scores indicate that the individual’s family communication is positive. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.82. In the present study, the scale showed good reliabilities ($\alpha = 0.89$, $\omega = 0.89$, $\lambda_6 = 0.88$).

2.3. Statistical analyses

To evaluate if the data was suitable for parametric tests, a normality test was initially performed. Once it was confirmed that the data followed a normal distribution, descriptive statistics, correlation coefficients, convergent and discriminant validity, and reliability coefficients such as McDonald Omega, Gutmann Lambda, and Cronbach Alpha were computed. Descriptive statistics were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 and JASP 0.16.4. The study utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in AMOS Graphics, adopting a two-step approach as recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) to investigate the research questions. The measurement model was tested first, followed by the hypothetical model. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Incremental Fit Index (IFI) were considered model fit indices. Previous research recommends that the SRMR and RMSEA values be less than 0.08, while the CFI, TLI, NFI, and IFI values should be greater than 0.90 (Hoyle & Panter, 1995). To include the observed variables in the model analysis, the sub-dimensions of the PMQ scale and the items of the FCS, OaSS and FHS scales were used. Moreover, gender and age were controlled as covariates in the study.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics, and correlations for the study variables. Fear of happiness was positively associated with psychological maltreatment ($r = 0.30$, $p < .001$), external shame ($r = 0.42$, $p < .001$) and negatively associated with family communication ($r = -0.35$, $p < .001$). While psychological maltreatment negatively correlated with family communication ($r = -0.57$, $p < .001$), it positively correlated with external shame ($r = 0.40$, $p < .001$). Also, there was a negative correlation between family communication and external shame ($r = -0.42$, $p < .001$).

3.2. Statistical assumptions

The results of the study showed that the skewness values ranged from -0.871 to 0.955 and the kurtosis values ranged from -0.016 to 0.978 , which falls within the normality criteria. Additionally, all reliability coefficients were higher than 0.88, which is an acceptable internal consistency. The variance inflation factor values ranged from 1.27 to

Table 1
Correlations and discriminant validity.

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Psychological maltreatment	0.74			
2. External shame	0.40	0.81		
3. Family communication	-0.57	-0.42	0.76	
4. Fear of happiness	0.30	0.42	-0.35	0.84

Diagonals (in bold) represents square root of AVE while off diagonals represent correlations

1.61, and the tolerance values ranged from 0.62 to 0.78, with a Durbin Watson value of 2.04, indicating that there were no issues with multicollinearity and residuals. Consequently, all assumptions were met, as suggested by Field (2016).

3.3. Structural equation modeling

First, the measurement model was tested with four latent and twenty-one observed variables. The model demonstrated good fit indices: $\chi^2(183, N = 390) = 524.57$, $\chi^2/df = 2.86$; RMSEA = 0.069, SRMR = 0.042, TLI = 0.931, CFI = 0.940, NFI = 0.912, IFI = 0.941, AIC = 620.576, and ECVI = 1.595. Factor loadings for all indicators were significant and ranged from 0.59 to 0.90, thus indicating that each indicator effectively represented its respective variable. Table 2 demonstrates the factor loadings, mean, standard deviation, composite reliability (CR), average variance extract (AVE), and reliability coefficients used to determine the convergent validity of constructs. In addition, the results revealed that the CRs and AVEs were greater than 0.70 and 0.50, respectively. According to the criteria proposed by Bagozzi and Yi (1988) and Fornell and Laecker (1981), the model had sufficient convergent and discriminant validity. All of the reliability coefficients were excellent ($\alpha \geq 0.88$, $\omega \geq 0.89$, and $\lambda_6 \geq 0.88$). As a result, these results demonstrated that the observed variables were reliable indicators of latent constructs.

After confirming the measurement model's adequacy, structural equation modeling was carried out. The partial model was tested with the relationship between psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness via the serial mediation roles of external shame and family communication. All fit indices were acceptable except NFI = 0.895; [$\chi^2(223, N = 390) = 639.00$, $\chi^2/df = 2.86$; RMSEA = 0.069, SRMR = 0.059, TLI = 0.919, CFI = 0.929, IFI = 0.929, AIC = 745.004, and ECVI = 1.915] with the significant pathways. In addition, it was seen that the pathway from psychological maltreatment to fear of happiness was insignificant ($B = 0.10, p > .05$). Consequently, this pathway was eliminated, and a full mediation model was conducted. Good fit indices were observed for the full mediation ($\chi^2(224, N = 390) = 640.183$, $\chi^2/df = 2.85$; RMSEA = 0.069, SRMR = 0.060, TLI = 0.919, CFI = 0.928, NFI = 0.900, IFI = 0.929, AIC = 744.183, and ECVI = 1.913). In addition, it was determined that each path was significant. Comparing partial and full models, the full mediation model was chosen due to the lack of significance of the direct path and quadrature in the partial model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1.18, df = 1, p > .05$) and the low AIC and ECVI indices. The effects of

gender and age were controlled in the full mediation model. Fig. 1 presents the findings of the serial mediation analyses.

Using 5000 bootstrap samples, we investigated the statistical significance of the mediating variable. This method produced confidence intervals (CI) with a confidence level of 95% for the indirect effects. Bootstrapped, 95% of the confidence intervals that did not exceed zero were deemed statistically significant (Hayes, 2018). The relationship between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness was partially mediated by external shame (0.063, $p < .05$; BCa95% lower limit = 0.035 to upper limit = 0.101). The relationship between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness was partially mediated by family communication (0.056, $p < .05$; BCa95% lower limit = 0.026 to upper limit = 0.094). The relationship between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness was fully mediated by external shame and family communication (0.006, $p < .05$; BCa95% lower limit = 0.001 to upper limit = 0.013). Table 3 demonstrates the indirect relationships between variables.

4. Discussion

Traces of psychological maltreatment experienced in childhood may be reflected in behaviors in adulthood. It is important that psychological maltreatment, which detrimentally influences both the physiological (Hart et al., 2022) and psychological (Chen et al., 2021) health of individuals, be examined in detail in research. Arslan (2022) also reported that factors related to psychological maltreatment should be examined in order to strengthen the mental health of individuals in adulthood. Moreover, it should be known which feelings and thoughts in the life of the individual are influenced by psychological maltreatment. Therefore, in this study, it is aimed to examine the serial mediating role of external shame and family communication in the relationship between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness. The findings demonstrated that external shame and family communication have a full mediating role in the association between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness. The results of this study revealed how psychological maltreatment exposed in childhood influences individuals' feelings and thoughts in their current lives. Based on the findings of this study, important implications may be drawn regarding childhood psychological maltreatment. The findings of the research are discussed and interpreted in detail below.

The first finding of the study is that external shame plays a mediating role in the relationship between childhood psychological maltreatment

Table 2
Factor loadings, descriptive statistics, CR, AVE, and reliabilities.

Latent variables	Indicator	Loadings	M	SD	CR	AVE	α	ω	λ^6
Psychological maltreatment	Factor 1	0.81	18.07	4.16	0.72	0.56	0.88	0.89	0.89
	Factor 2	0.68	7.88	2.67					
External shame	Item 1	0.68	1.38	1.06	0.93	0.65	0.93	0.93	93
	Item 2	0.80	0.97	1.03					
	Item 3	0.71	1.31	1.23					
	Item 4	0.81	0.97	1.04					
	Item 5	0.87	0.80	1.01					
	Item 6	0.87	0.74	0.97					
	Item 7	0.86	0.88	1.07					
	Item 8	0.81	0.94	1.04					
Family communication	Item 1	0.71	3.10	0.89	0.89	0.58	0.89	0.89	0.88
	Item 2	0.59	3.61	0.63					
	Item 3	0.80	3.00	0.94					
	Item 4	0.81	3.09	0.93					
	Item 5	0.76	3.41	0.80					
	Item 6	0.86	3.23	0.89					
Fear of happiness	Item 1	0.73	2.66	1.74	0.92	0.71	0.92	0.92	0.91
	Item 2	0.85	2.45	1.69					
	Item 3	0.90	2.41	1.65					
	Item 4	0.86	2.23	1.61					
	Item 5	0.84	2.42	1.63					

CR composite reliability; AVE average variance extract.

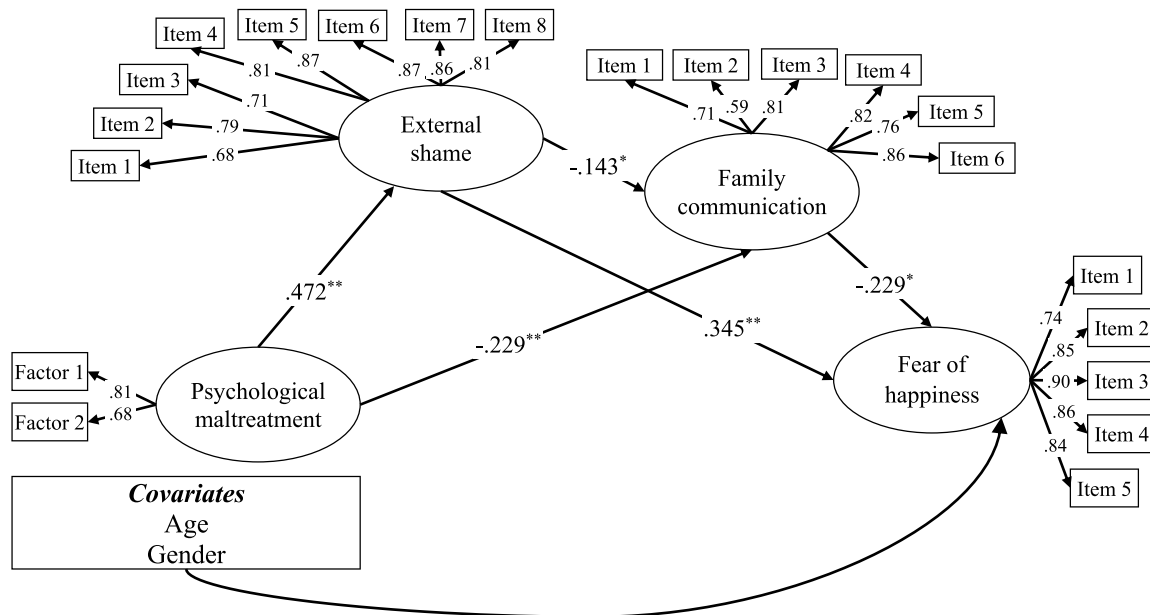


Fig. 1. Structural equation modeling for the serial mediation model. Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, PMP: parcel of childhood psychological maltreatment, ESP: parcel of external shame, FCP: parcel of family communication, FH: item of fear of happiness.

Table 3
Indirect effect of serial mediation model.

Path	Coefficient	95%CI	
		LL	UL
Childhood psychological maltreatment → External shame → Fear of happiness	0.063	0.035	0.101
Childhood psychological maltreatment → Family communication → Fear of happiness	0.056	0.026	0.094
Childhood psychological maltreatment → External shame → Family communication → Fear of happiness	0.006	0.001	0.013

Note. CI confidence interval; LL lower limit; UL upper limit.

and fear of happiness. In other words, childhood psychological maltreatment predicts fear of happiness through external shame. Thus, the first research question of the study was answered (RQ1). This finding indicates that individuals exposed to psychological maltreatment may experience fear of happiness indirectly via external shame. The results of previous studies support this finding. For instance, [Mwakanyamale and Yizhen's \(2019\)](#) study emphasized the significance of a person's relationship with their parents in terms of their cognitive and emotional development. Individuals who cannot establish a healthy relationship with their parents are more likely to experience shame. In the study of [Vizin et al. \(2022\)](#), it was reported that psychological maltreatment predicted shame. Similarly, in a recent study by [O'Loughlen et al. \(2023\)](#), it was stated that there is a significant relationship between psychological maltreatment and individuals' shame. Moreover, it has been revealed that individuals with negative traumatic experiences in childhood have a higher level of external shame (e.g., [Cunha et al., 2012](#); [Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010](#)). Apart from these studies, a limited number of studies emphasize that there is a relationship between external shame and fear of happiness. For instance, [Muhtar's \(2016\)](#) study stated that there is a significant relationship between external shame and fear of happiness. [Sinha \(2017\)](#), on the other hand, revealed that individuals who experience external shame tend to avoid positive emotions. In other words, individuals with high levels of external shame experience fewer positive emotions, such as happiness. Based on all these research findings, exposure to psychological maltreatment may cause individuals to experience a high level of external shame and,

indirectly, more fear of happiness. While it may not be feasible to completely prevent individuals from enduring psychological mistreatment from their parents, it is possible to potentially mitigate the extent of external shame they experience. Thus, these individuals can experience more positive emotions, such as happiness.

The second finding obtained in the research is that family communication has a mediating role between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness. In other words, childhood psychological maltreatment predicts the fear of happiness via family communication. With this finding, the second research question of the study was answered (RQ2). This finding reveals that being exposed to psychological maltreatment such as neglect or abuse within the family can weaken family communication, and therefore individuals may avoid positive emotions. This finding is consistent with the results of other studies in the literature. For example, in a recent study by [Ümmet et al. \(2023\)](#), family communication is weaker in individuals who have experienced psychological maltreatment. Similarly, previous studies have reported that unhealthy family relationships and communication are associated with psychological maltreatment (e.g., [Burgess & Conger, 1978](#); [Gaudin et al., 1996](#)). In addition, individuals who are psychologically maltreated by their parents or caregivers experience more conflict in their interpersonal relationships ([Herrenkohl et al., 2012](#)) and tend to avoid conflict in their relationships ([Paul & Eckenrode, 2015](#)). Considering that this situation may also be seen in family life, family communication can be seriously influenced by psychological maltreatment. Apart from this, unhealthy family communication prevents individuals from experiencing positive emotions. When the literature is examined, [Özkan's \(2020\)](#) research results support this finding. In the afore-mentioned study, it was stated that there was a significant relationship between the family relationship and the fear of happiness. In the study of [Elmas \(2021\)](#), it was reported that the fear of happiness varies from culture to culture and is related to family structure. In this respect, it can be said that poor family communication may be a factor that triggers the fear of happiness. All these research results demonstrate that family communication may weaken due to psychological maltreatment, and more fear of happiness can be experienced due to unhealthy family communication. Even if individuals cannot be prevented from being subjected to psychological maltreatment, strengthening family communication using different methods can reduce the fear of happiness.

The main finding of this research is that external shame and family communication have a full mediating role in the relationship between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness. In other words, it indirectly predicts fear of happiness through childhood psychological maltreatment, external shame, and family communication. This finding was the answer to the third research question of the study (RQ3). This finding reveals that individuals experience more external shame as they are exposed to psychological maltreatment, this reflects negatively on family communication and therefore the fear of happiness is triggered. This finding is also supported by the research of Kong and Martire (2019). In the afore-mentioned study, it was reported that individuals who experienced problematic life events in their families tended to have more negative emotions and avoid positive emotions. Similarly, in the study conducted by Joshanloo (2018), it was stated that individuals who were insecurely attached to their parents in the family where they grew up experienced more fear of happiness. Especially when it is considered that individuals' belief systems towards the world develop in childhood, being exposed to psychological maltreatment may influence the experience of positive emotions. Roazzi et al. (2016) revealed that belief styles play an important role in individuals' happiness. Lastly, a recent study conducted by Scheinfeld (2023) revealed that, consistent with the present study's findings, the subjective sense of shame among individuals has an adverse influence on the dynamics of family communication. Crane et al.'s (2020) study also indirectly stated that shame has an impact on family communication. Based on these studies, it can be said that it is normal for the external shame experienced by individuals, especially those exposed to psychological maltreatment, to have an adverse influence on family communication. Individuals who experience shame may feel inadequate and embarrassed in front of other people. Therefore, they may have difficulty communicating. This situation may cause individuals to avoid positive emotions. Based on all the research findings mentioned above, it can be said that even though childhood psychological maltreatment cannot be prevented, strengthening family communication by reducing the external shame of individuals may be beneficial in reducing the fear of happiness.

4.1. Implications

The results obtained in this research will provide important implications for researchers and practitioners in the future. The fact that there is no research in the literature in which the four concepts examined in this study are discussed together makes this research valuable. Findings revealed that individuals exposed to childhood psychological maltreatment experience more external shame, weakening family communication, and this situation increases the fear of happiness. If the psychological maltreatment cannot be prevented, the external shame they feel may be prevented, thus weakening family communication. In this way, individuals may experience happiness as they wish by not avoiding positive emotions. In addition, since this study reveals the effects of psychological maltreatment on individuals, intervention strategies that support mental health can be developed by mental health providers for these individuals. Within the scope of these interventions, it is recommended to use cognitive behavioral therapy approaches in the literature to change individuals' beliefs about happiness (Arslan, 2021). Moreover, it has been emphasized in the literature that the inclusion of positive psychology-based interventions in the process may improve beliefs about happiness and help people struggle against psychological maltreatment more easily (Arslan, 2023; Lambert et al., 2019). Consequently, these approaches and findings indicate that changing the thoughts of individuals who are exposed to psychological maltreatment about happiness will have positive reflections.

4.2. Limitations and future research

Despite the many important implications of the study, a few

limitations should be mentioned. First, a cross-sectional approach was preferred in this study, which restricted the causal relationship between the variables. Therefore, longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to more strongly reveal the cause-effect relationship between the variables in future studies. Another limitation is the collection of data from the Turkish sample using the convenience sampling method. In future studies, sample groups from different cultures and societies can be determined. The third limitation of the study is that the measurement tools used are self-reported. Thus, data may be collected in various ways in future research. Lastly, although the data were collected from voluntary participants, social desirability errors should be taken into account when evaluating the findings of this study and designing future studies.

5. Conclusions

This research revealed the full mediating role of family communication with external shame in the connection between childhood psychological maltreatment and fear of happiness. The findings of this study provide guidance to mental health researchers and practitioners. It is important to take measures to minimize the shame and poor family communication experienced by individuals who have been subjected to childhood psychological maltreatment. Psycho-educational programs to be developed and implemented within the scope of these measures can help these individuals change their beliefs about happiness and experience positive emotions more.

Funding. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Availability of Data and Material. Data will be available on request.

Pre-registration Statement. This study was not pre-registered.

Ethical Approval. The study protocol has been approved by the Yildiz Technical University's Scientific Research and Ethics Committee (Report number = 20230402009, Verification code = 24c78). The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its following updates.

Consent to Participate. Informed consent was obtained from all the individual participants that were included in the study.

Author Statement.

Study planning: SAS, FBY; **Study plan validation:** SAS, FBY; **Project implication:** SAS, FBY, ZGK, SO; **Data collection:** SAS, FBY; **Data interpretation:** SAS, FBY, ZGK, SO; **Data analysis:** SAS; **First draft:** SAS, FBY, ZGK, SO; **Final approval:** SAS, FBY, ZGK, SO.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgement

We thank the participants of this study and those who developed the measures we used in the study.

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