

The Influence of Social Class on Risk Behaviors Among College Students: The Mediating Role of Family Violence

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, various kinds of risk behaviors among urban and rural adolescents have increasingly aroused public concern. To explore the influence mechanism of social class and family violence on risk behaviors and the mediating effect in this process, this study selected 216 students from universities in Beijing and Hebei for a questionnaire survey based on the principle of convenient sampling. The results of regression analyses and mediating effect analysis revealed that participants' subjective social class significantly predicted risk behaviors and family violence. Correlations between variables were verified, and family violence played a partial mediating role between social class and risk behaviors. Our findings echoed previous studies on the relationships between social class, risk behaviors, and family violence in pairs. Furthermore, this study innovatively proposed and constructed a mediating model of the relationship among the three variables through statistical analysis, which offered evidence support for subsequent researches in the field of educational psychology and also provided space for further studies related to family factors.

1. Introduction

Risk behaviors are influential to adolescents both in current situations and future. As people's primary and fundamental environment, family affects people's behaviors with various factors, and family violence is one of the factors (Berg et al., 2017). Based on social class, the fluency and kinds of family violence are different (Brackenreed, 2010), leading to different risk behaviors. Thus, social class, risk behaviors, and family violence have relationships between each two of them, and the relationship among these three factors should be explored further.

1.1. Literature review

Risk behaviors refer to behaviors that can threaten psychosocial aspects of successful development (Jessor, 2016). People with risk behaviors can be challenging to accomplish

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regular developmental tasks, fulfill expected social roles, acquire necessary skills, and transit to the next stage in life (Jessor, 2016).

As for the social class, which is "shaped by an individual's material resources as well as perceptions of rank vis-à-vis others in society" (Kraus et al., 2012, p. 546), higher classes control more means of production and own more money (Kraus et al., 2012), which protects them from poverty and low socioeconomic status. Moreover, social class can also be seen from a cultural perspective, containing different behavioral patterns and values (Kraus et al., 2012).

Family violence is used to describe physical aggression and emotional abuse (Carlson & Worden, 2005). However, family violence is not detailed enough in legal definitions (Barocas et al., 2016; Carlson & Worden, 2005). Some behaviors are ambiguous to people so that they cannot ensure whether they can seek help from laws or get help from outside (Carlson & Worden, 2005), causing a complex social problem to be excluded from the society (Barocas et al., 2016). Thus, family violence is deserved to explore due to the lack of social attention.

1.1.1. The Relationship between social class and risk behaviors

Individuals from different class backgrounds act based on different manners and rules (Elias, 1978, cited in Kraus et al., 2012), so they have different lifestyles which are built on "an organized pattern of interrelated behaviors" (Jessor, 2016, p. 122). As a factor, social class clusters a group of patterned behaviors with specific context characters (Kraus et al., 2012). For example, families with a lower social class are more likely to have the punitive discipline to their children (McWhirter et al., 2017), and their children were associated with an increased risk of behavioral problems (Devaney, 2008).

Besides, social class also shapes the economic condition of a family (Kraus et al., 2012), and the economic condition correlates with risk behaviors (Brackenreed, 2010; McWhirter et al., 2017). For instance, poverty can cause "poor nutrition and low educational status" (Brackenreed, 2010, p. 112). Poor nutrition might cause the failure of brain development and difficulties in future study and socialization (Brackenreed, 2010; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Lower educational status can push people to enroll in a criminal social group for purchasing an alternative reputation (Carroll et al., 2009).

1.1.2. The Relationship between risk behaviors and family violence

Whether people experienced family violence or just witnessed it in their early life, family violence has severe effects on them (Sternberg et al., 2006). Children from these families are more likely to show aggressive behaviors than their peers and face developmental challenges when they enter the next life stage (Sternberg et al., 2006). According to the theory of latent vulnerability, childhood maltreatment will lead to a significant increase in the probability of psychological disorder, and the impact may last a lifetime (McCrory & Viding, 2015). Furthermore, adolescents are predicted to have poor life outcomes such as substance use, violent behaviors, school dropout, and juvenile crime when their families have conflicts (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

More importantly, negative family relationships such as neglect which is a kind of emotional abuse (Queensland Government, 2013), might lead adolescents to pay less attention to their "Academic Image" and more to their "Social Image" (Carroll et al., 2009, p. 29), and search for outside attachment (Cantor et al., 2019). However, outside attachment has positive or negative effects (Cantor et al., 2019). If adolescents were associated with a negative outside attachment that purchases "Social Image", adolescents will participate in "law-breaking activities and exemption from adult control" (Carroll et al., 2009, p. 28).

1.1.3. The Relationship between social class and family violence

Low socioeconomic status is related to a higher risk of abuse and neglect than ordinary families (Brackenreed, 2010). Compared with higher-income families, lower-income families have more physical abuse (Brackenreed, 2010). Moreover, due to higher work pressure in lower-class families, parents can be more tense and irritable, leading to punitive results for their children (McWhirter et al., 2017). lower social class means the disadvantaged neighborhood and poverty-related living environment, associated with parental depression, decreasing emotional and behavior control (McWhirter et al., 2017). Although parents' mental problems will not influence their children directly, it has long-term and chronic effects on their children, increasing the rate of experiencing depression and substance abuse when their children become adults (Berg et al., 2017; Olesen et al., 2010).

1.2. The current study

Overall, family violence itself deserves social attention. No matter in law or society, the definition of family violence is very vague (Barocas et al., 2016; Carlson & Worden, 2005). And as a serious social behavior, family violence is simplified since it happens in the family, leading to social contempt of family violence (Barocas et al., 2016; Carlson & Worden, 2005). Therefore, this study aims to raise social attention to family violence and prove the importance of family violence.

Besides, previous literature mainly explored relationships between social class, risk behaviors, and family violence in pairs, with rare discussion about the mediating effect. Moreover, some of the previous literature were literature reviews or summarized documents (Brackenreed, 2010; Carroll et al., 2009; Jessor, 2016; McWhirter et al., 2017; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012), not the evidenced-based researches. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the relationship among three factors through an evidenced-based research.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

According to the principle of convenient sampling, volunteers were randomly selected from the current university students of universities in Beijing and Hebei, China. Through screening questions and data cleaning, a total of 6 invalid questionnaires and samples with careless answers were eliminated. Thus, the final sample population included a total of 216 students. The age range of the subjects was 17 to 23 years ($M = 19.78$, $SD = 1.61$). Among them, 106 were male students, accounting for 49.07%; other 110 were female students, accounting for 50.93%. All participants had a bachelor's degree or above and were well-educated. All participants were in good physical condition, right-handed, and free of brain disease or dyslexia.

2.2. Instruments

The questionnaire was mainly composed of four parts. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic information about the participants, including age, sex, health condition, and exclusion for dyslexia and brain disease. The scales used for the last three sections are as follows.

2.2.1. The MacArthur scale of subjective SES

The MacArthur scale was designed to measure participants' subjective social class (Adler et al., 2000). The form of the scale was a 10-step ladder (as shown in Figure 1). Subjects were asked to select their rank on the ladder based on their education level, occupational status, and income. A higher score indicated a higher subjective social class. Subjects scoring more than 6 points or less than 3 points belong to the typical high and low class respectively. The scale had shown good reliability and validity in the application of Chinese students, with a reliability of 0.62 for retest at an interval of 6 months, which could be applied to the study of Chinese adolescents (Cui et al., 2011).

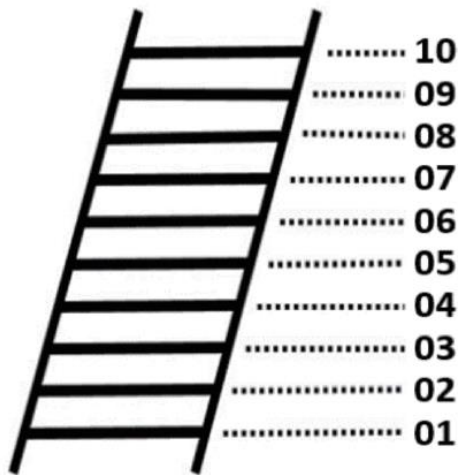


Figure 1. Ladder of SES

2.2.2. The Chinese version of Achenbach youth self-report-2001 version (YSR-2001-CV)

The Chinese Version of the Achenbach Youth Self-Report-2001 Version was used to measure the level of problem behavior of the subjects (Gao, 2019). Developed by Achenbach in 1976 and revised several times in 1983, 1991, and 2001 (by Achenbach and Rescorla), YSR-2001-CV was the most commonly used tool internationally for assessing adolescents' behavioral problems and social competence. The scale had 112 questions and nine dimensions, constitutes withdrawn, somatic complaints, anxious/depressed, social problem, thought problem, attention problem, delinquent behavior, aggressive behavior, and others. This study selected "anxious/depressed", "withdrawn", "delinquent behavior" and "aggressive behavior" as the indicators of risk behavior, with a total of 11 items. The higher the total score, the more likely adolescents were to have risk behaviors. The Cronbach α coefficient of YSR-2001-CV was 0.94, and the retest reliability of the total score after fortnight was 0.87 (Wang et al., 2013). It can be seen that the Chinese Version of Achenbach Youth Self-Report-2001 Version had good reliability and validity, and it was an effective tool for measuring problem behavior of Chinese adolescents.

2.2.3. Egma Minnen av Bardndosnauppförstran (EMBU)

The scale was a questionnaire used to evaluate parenting attitudes and behaviors (Perris et al., 1980), and the Chinese version of EMBU used in this study was translated and revised by Yue Dongmei (Yue et al., 1993). It contained 66 items in total, including 10 items related to family violence. The revised Chinese version of EMBU achieved many psychological measurement indexes and had good reliability and validity. It was mainly applicable to university students or adolescents.

2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed through WeChat, and the student volunteers of Renmin University of China and Hebei Normal University were randomly recruited as participants. The questionnaire used the same instructions and was conducted by full-time psychology undergraduate and graduate students. According to the principle of informed consent, participants were informed of the anonymity of the questionnaire, and any information was protected as personal privacy, which emphasized the confidentiality and truthfulness of the questionnaire. In addition, if participants felt uncomfortable with any questions, they could choose not to answer them, which guaranteed the privacy protection of the participants. Participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire independently in a quiet environment, first completing the demographic information part, then completing the three scales in sequence. Participants completed the questionnaire and submitted it immediately. The whole process took about two minutes, and participants were given a small amount of money via WeChat red packets after completing the questionnaire.

2.4. Statistical analysis

After the questionnaires were collected, through screening questions and data cleaning, a total of 6 invalid questionnaires including samples with too short answer time or careless answers were eliminated and effective questionnaires were retained. Excel was used for data entry and computerization; later, SPSS 26.0 was used for statistical analysis and processing. Descriptive statistics, T test, analysis of variance, correlation analysis, regression analysis and structural equation model were conducted to analyze the relationships between variables and verify the mediating role of family violence.

3. Results

3.1. Common method biases test

Based on the fact that all the data collected were from the questionnaire survey independently reported by the subjects, there might be common method bias. Therefore, this study adopted Harman's One-factor Test to test common method bias. The results showed that there were 4 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. In the case of no rotation, the amount of variation explained by the first factor was 35.636%, lower than the critical standard of 40% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, it could be considered that there was no serious common method biases and further data analysis could be carried out.

3.2. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses

The descriptive statistics and correlation analysis matrices of demographic characteristics and key variables were shown in Table 1. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between subjective social class, risk behaviors and family violence.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses for demographic characteristics and main variables

	M(SD)	1	2	3	4
1 Age	19.78(1.61)	1			
2 Gender	-	-	1		
3 Social Class	5.44(1.24)	.35**	-.242**	1	
4 Family Violence	1.90(0.58)	-.165*	-.018	-.491**	1
5 Risk Behaviors	1.85(0.46)	-.172*	0.074	-.630**	.784**

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

The results showed that the average subjective social class of the subjects ($n=216$) was 5.44 ($SD = 1.24$), the degree of family violence ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 0.58$) and the level of risk behaviors ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.46$) were lower than the median of each subscale. There was a significant negative correlation between social class and risk behaviors ($r = -0.630$, $p < 0.01$). The higher the subjective social class, the lower the level of risk behaviors. There was a significant negative correlation between social class and family violence ($r = -0.491$, $p < 0.01$). The higher the subjective social class, the lower the degree of family violence. There was a significant positive correlation between family violence and risk behaviors ($R = 0.784$, $p < 0.01$). The higher the degree of family violence, the higher the level of risk behaviors.

In addition, the relationship between each subdivision dimension of risk behaviors and subjective social class showed a slightly difference: Except for the result that there was no significant correlation between delinquent behaviors and subjective social class, the other three dimensions of risk behaviors (“withdrawn”, “anxious/depressed” and “aggressive behavior”) showed significant negative correlation with subjective social class ($p < 0.01$). The higher the subjective social class, the lower the level of withdrawn, anxiety/depression and aggressive behaviors.

3.3. Regression analyses of social class and family violence on risk behaviors

3.3.1. Regression analysis of social class on risk behaviors

The above analyses showed that there was a correlation between social class and the total and multidimensional score of risk behaviors. To further explore the relationship between social class and risk behaviors, this study took risk behaviors as the outcome variable and social class as the predictive variable to conduct linear regression analysis. The premise of regression analysis was that the collinearity of independent variables should not be too high. Tolerance was used as the index to judge collinearity, and the tolerance of each variable was analyzed. The results were all greater than 0.5, which meant there was no serious collinearity, so regression analyses could be carried out. After eliminating outliers that deviated from three standard deviations, regression analyses was conducted, and the results were shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

The predictive effect of social class on risk behaviors

Predictor	Outcome	R ²	ΔR ²	β	t
Social Class	Risk Behaviors	0.397	0.394	-0.630	-11.867***

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, similarly hereinafter.

The results indicated that the regression coefficient of social class on risk behaviors was significant ($\beta = -0.630$, $p < 0.001$), and social class could explain 39.4% of the total amount of variation of risk behaviors, which had a good negative predictive effect.

3.3.2. Regression analysis of family violence on risk behaviors

The above analyses showed that there was a correlation between the level of family violence and the total & multidimensional score of risk behaviors. In order to further explore the relationship between family violence and risk behaviors, this study took risk behaviors as the outcome variable and family violence as the predictive variable to conduct linear regression analysis after eliminating outliers, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3.

The predictive effect of family violence on risk behaviors

Predictor	Outcome	R ²	ΔR ²	β	t
Family Violence	Risk Behaviors	0.614	0.612	0.784	18.457***

The results indicated that the regression coefficient of family violence on risk behaviors was significant ($\beta = 0.784$, $p < 0.001$), and family violence could explain 39.4% of the total amount of variation of risk behaviors, which had a good positive predictive effect.

3.4. The influencing mechanism of social class on risk behaviors: the mediating role of family violence

In order to test the mediating effect of family violence between social class and risk behaviors, this study applied the mediating effect test method (Wen et al., 2004) based on SPSS 26.0. The premise of mediating effect test was that there was significant correlation between independent variable, mediating variable and dependent variable. Through the previous correlation analysis of the three variables of social class, family violence and risk behaviors, it could be concluded that the correlation between the above three variables was significant, which met the preconditions of the mediating effect test.

It could be seen from 3.3.1 that the regression coefficient of social class on risk behaviors was significant ($\beta = -0.630$, $p < 0.001$), so the mediating effect analysis could be continued. Further, regression analysis was conducted with social class as the predictive variable and family violence as the outcome variable. The results were shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

Regression analysis of social class on family violence

Predictor	Outcome	R ²	ΔR ²	β	t
Social Class	Family Violence	0.241	0.237	-0.491	-8.235***

As shown in Table 4, the regression coefficient of family violence on social class was significant ($\beta = -0.491$, $p < 0.001$); as shown in 3.3.2, the regression coefficient of family violence on risk behaviors was significant ($\beta = 0.784$, $p < 0.001$), thus the regression analysis of independent variable and mediating variable on dependent variable could be continued. The next step of regression analysis was conducted with social class and family violence as predictive variables and risk behaviors as outcome variable. The results were shown in Table 5, and the scatter plot was shown in Figure 2.

Table 5.

Regression analysis of social class and family violence on risk behaviors

Predictors	Outcome	R ²	ΔR ²	β	t
Social Class	Risk Behaviors	0.694	0.691	-0.323	-7.430***
Family Violence				0.625	14.361***

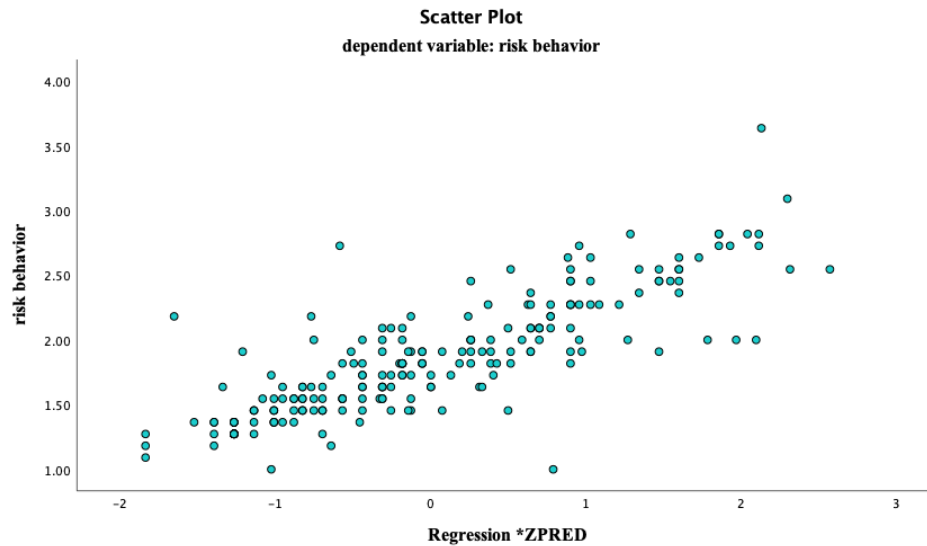


Figure 2. Scatter plot of regression analysis of social class and family violence on risk behaviors

As shown in Table 5, the regression coefficients of social class and family violence on risk behaviors ($bs = -0.323, 0.625$) were significant, indicating that partial mediating effect was significant. See Table 6 for the results.

Table 6.

The mediating effect of family violence between social class and risk behaviors

	Standardized Regression Equations	Regression Coefficient Test
Step 1	$Y = -0.630x$	$SE = 0.019 \quad t = -11.867^{***}$
Step 2	$W = -0.491x$	$SE = 0.028 \quad t = -8.235^{***}$
Step 3	$Y = -0.323x + 0.625w$	$SE = 0.016 \quad t = -7.430^{***}$ $SE = 0.034 \quad t = 14.361^{***}$

As shown in Table 6, the regression coefficients of social class on risk behaviors, social class on family violence and family violence on risk behaviors were all significant ($ps < 0.001$). After introducing the mediating role of family violence, the regression coefficient of social class on risk behaviors was still significant ($p < 0.001$) but partly decreased. This indicated that family violence played a partial mediating role between social class and risk behaviors. The contribution rate of the mediating effect was 48.71%, and variance was 54.5%. See Figure 3 for the specific path.

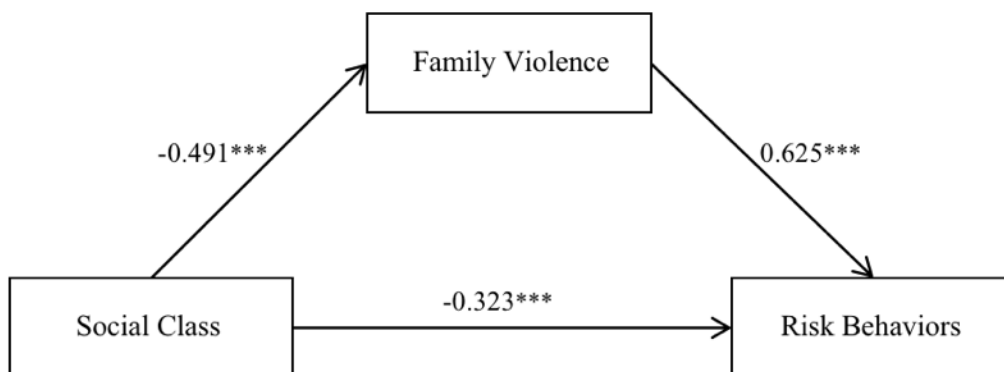


Figure 3. Path diagram for mediating model of family violence between social class and risk behaviors

4. Discussion

The present result of this research agreed and verified the previous literature that social class, risk behaviors, and family violence had relationships in pairs. In this research, the regression coefficient of social class on risk behaviors was significant, and there was a significant negative correlation between social class and family violence. Previous studies were verified by this research that lower social class had higher frequency of risk behaviors and family violence, so social class had distinct negative correlations with risk behaviors and family violence (Brackenreed, 2010; Devaney, 2008; McWhirter et al., 2017). Besides, in this research, the regression coefficient of family violence on risk behaviors was significant, which confirmed that family violence positively correlated with risk behaviors (Carroll et al., 2009; Sternberg et al., 2006; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

Furthermore, based on previous ideas, this research proved that family violence had a strong mediating effect of intervening between social class and risk behaviors. In this research, after introducing the mediating role of family violence, the regression coefficient of social class on risk behaviors was still significant but partly decreased. In other words, when family violence was a mediator variable to adjust the risk behaviors, though the social class was still influential to risk behaviors, less family violence reduced the frequency of risk behaviors.

However, as a category of the risk behaviors in the research, delinquent behaviors such as playing truant were not as significantly correlated with social class as other categories. The reason might be that the rules and regulations of the school were relatively restricted. Compared with the retreat, anxiety and depression, and other risk behaviors, delinquent behaviors may lead to more severe punishment such as low academic outcomes or even being discharged from the college. As a college student and a person who purchased the education qualification, the costs of this risk behavior were relatively high, which might be a reason why delinquent behaviors were not strongly correlated with social class in college students.

Therefore, the limitation of this research was the sample bias. All samples were urban college students with bachelor's degrees, and samples' average family conditions were better than the average living standard of Chinese residents. Such bias led to the result that the frequency of family violence and the frequency of problem behavior were both low. Furthermore, because the sample put the education qualification at an important status, they rarely participated in rule-breaking behaviors to successfully get the education qualification. As a category of risk behaviors, rule-breaking behaviors were not distinctly presented in this research. Moreover, sample of this research could not prove the economic influence mentioned by previous literature due to their above average living standard. Thus, the result was not generalized enough, and mainly used in well-educated and middle-class people.

In the future, researchers can expand the sample across various groups of people. For example, future research can include both well-educated and not-well educated people. Or researchers can choose samples from urban areas and rural areas, aims to illustrate economic influence mentioned by previous literature. Even choose samples across different cultures, explores whether the mediating effect of family violence still works in other cultural background. Besides, influences of other factors in family domain can be tested, such as parental education background and parental styles (Blum et al., 2002). Moreover, researchers can use mixed method, combining qualitative methods and quantitative methods. For example, based on questionnaires, researchers can include semi-structured interviews to further collect data and analyze sample's thoughts.

5. Conclusion

This research began with the critical impacts of risk behaviors on adolescents. Then proposed social class and family violence could be factors to influence risk behaviors. Based on previous literature that commented on the relationship between factors in pair, this research further explored the mediating effects of family violence between social class and risk behaviors. This research showed that social class had a strong negative correlation with family violence and risk behaviors, and family violence could positively mediate risk behaviors under the influence of social class.

Though this research closed the gap of the previous literature and confirmed the mediating effects of family violence, the sample bias was the limitation of this research. This research mainly explained the mediating model of family violence in well-educated and middle-class people with quantitative methods. Future researchers can develop the sample choosing and method uses, making the result to be more generalized.

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