Effects of Childhood Experiences on Adult Desire to Parent

Sarah Bailey
Dominican University of California

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Effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences On Adult Desire to Parent
Sarah Bailey, Dominican University of California

**Background**
Factors Influencing Decision to have Children:
- Childhood events have direct effect on personal outlook on life. (Korkeil et al, 1992)
- Personal outlook (optimistic vs. pessimistic attitudes) are two ends of bipolar axis. (Marshall, Wortman, Rusulas, Hervig, & Vickers, 1992)
- Socio-economic status significantly impacts levels of optimism/pessimism. (Heinonen et al, 2006)
- Optimistic/Pessimistic views, often associated with happy/unhappy childhood experiences, influence choices about having children. (Park, 2005)

Childhood experiences strongly influence expectations for parenting. For some potential parents, it is:
- A desire to “reproduce positive family experiences.”
- An opportunity to fix mistakes of an adversity-filled childhood by creating a good future for own children.
- Too frightening, wanting to avoid putting a child through what was experienced during their own childhood. (McDonnell, 2012)

**Hypotheses**
Experiences from adult’s childhood color decisions about having children, but this is connected to individual differences in Optimistic vs. Pessimistic attitudes toward life in general. It is predicted that:
1. Participants with significant adverse childhood experience and a high level of pessimism will decline to have children (presumably out of fear of repeating their own problematic youth). Hypothesis supported by positive relationship.
2. Participants with little/no childhood adversity will want children independent of their levels of optimism/pessimism (presumably to repeat those positive experiences). Hypothesis supported if no relationship between variables.

**Method**
- **Participants**: 594 adults (67 men, 511 women, & 16 other)
- Recruited through posts on Facebook, Tumblr, and emails to personal contacts.

**Measures**
- **Demographics and Parenting History**
- **Desire to Parent Questionnaire** Used to evaluate past or future plans for children
- **The Life Orientation Scale** Measure of optimism/pessimism
- **Childhood Family Environment Scale** Provided information on participants’ childhood environments and possible adverse experiences
- **The Childhood Rating Scale** Measure of severity of childhood adversity

**Procedure**: Data collected anonymously at Internet survey site.

**Conclusions**
- Optimism is a factor for those without a traumatic childhood, but is not a factor for those who had adverse experiences.
- There exists a weak, overall positive relationship between higher levels of optimism and desire to parent.
- Childhood adversity seems to have a small influence on diminishing desire to parent.
- As adversity and optimism-pessimism are only very weakly related to desire to parent, future research should consider other factors such as certain types of adversities, other personality traits, and parents’ environmental circumstances.

**Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OVERALL VARIABLE RELATIONSHIPS (Entire Sample, n = 594)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(All Correlation Significant at p &lt; 5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of Optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity of Childhood Adversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire to Parent Questionnaire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire to Parent 0-7 Rating Scale</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Evaluation of H1** (331 Participants - Childhood Adversity)
- r = - 0.06 (p = 28%) Does Not Support Hypothesis
- r = + 0.06 (p = 27%) Does Not Support Hypothesis

**Evaluation of H2** (263 Participants - No Childhood Adversity)
- r = + 0.14 (p = 2%) Does Not Support Hypothesis
- r = + 0.01 (p = 87%) Supports Hypothesis