Effects of Childhood Experiences on Adult Desire to Parent

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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, Kusulas, 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.

Results
OVERALL VARIABLE RELATIONSHIPS (Entire Sample, n = 594)
(All Correlation Significant at p < 5%)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Optimism</th>
<th>Severity of Childhood Adversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Parent Questionnaire</td>
<td>r = + 0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Parent 0-7 Rating Scale</td>
<td>r = + 0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evaluation of H1 (331 Participants - Childhood Adversity)
- r = - 0.06 (p = 28%)  
- 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

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.