

Research on the impact of childhood experiences on adulthood personality

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Abstract. This study focuses on the interactions between family backgrounds, childhood experiences, and childrearing practices within the bidirectional correlation between childhood experiences and adulthood personality traits. Based on a cross-sectional questionnaire survey involving 145 adults aged from 18 to 60 (49 males, 96 females), it adopts the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ-SF) and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Adult Form, EPQ) to assess the effects of positive and adverse childhood experiences on adulthood personality traits (e.g., self-esteem, social competence, and emotional instability). The findings show that positive childhood experiences significantly enhance self-esteem ($\beta=0.56$, $p<0.05$) and social competence ($\beta=0.35$, $p<0.05$) in adulthood, whereas adverse childhood experiences substantially increase the risk for emotional instability (OR = 3.41, 95% CI [1.89, 5.73]). Also, childhood neglect has a greater impact on emotional stability in adult females ($\beta=-0.47$) than in males ($\beta=-0.9$, $p<0.01$). According to the statistics, the influences and adaptive mechanisms of childhood experiences on childhood personality exhibit significant gender differences. Therefore, the research proposes an integrated family-school-community intervention model, expecting to mitigate the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences as early as possible via early screening, resilience training, and other measures.

1 Introduction

As childhood constitutes an important period for personality development, childhood experiences can have a lasting, profound impact on an individual's psychological and behavioral patterns in adulthood. According to the attachment theory, the quality of early parent-child interactions directly influences an individual's ability to establish trust relationships [1]. Similarly, Erikson's psychosocial development theory highlights that the cultivation of autonomy in childhood is closely associated with self-efficacy [2]. Many studies have demonstrated that individuals' interaction with the family and society during childhood can profoundly affect their personality traits, emotion regulation capabilities, and interpersonal patterns in adulthood by virtue of neuroplasticity and social learning. As the attachment theory suggests, parent-child interactions from 0 to 3 play an immediate role in

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the formation of secure attachment that encourages individuals to establish trust relationships in adulthood. In contrast, inferior interactions may lead to avoidant or ambivalent attachment [1]. As for adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect, and domestic violence, they are not only significantly correlated with adult psychological disorders (e.g., depression and anxiety) [3], but may also alter the amygdala-prefrontal circuitry via chronic stress responses to increase the risks for emotional dysregulation, chronic pain, and other physiological conditions [4].

In recent years, the focus of relevant research has shifted from a single-culture perspective to a cross-country comparison. For instance, the Global Flourishing Study (GFS), led by Harvard University, collects data from 200,000 adults across 22 countries, revealing that there is a significant cultural difference in predicting an individual's mastery (i.e., the capacity of over personal behaviors and emotions, as well as the external environment) based on the quality of parent-child interactions during childhood. In terms of cultural significance, Japan has a relative risk (RR) of 1.15, much higher than that of Germany (0.98), indicating that socio-cultural background plays a moderating role in personality formation [5].

The theoretical value of this study lies in integrating the insights of developmental and clinical psychology to construct a dual-path "risk-protection" model. Practically, it attempts to provide a scientific basis for optimizing family education strategies (e.g., reflection of feelings) and designing in-school mental health curricula (e.g., resilience training) [6]. By exploring the significance of gender differences, the research further calls for early screening and intervention of psychological problems among females, thereby mitigating the intergenerational transmission of ACEs [7].

Despite existing research having verified the significant correlations between childhood trauma (e.g., abuse and neglect) and emotional disorders, the compensatory mechanism of positive childhood experiences, as well as the gender differences in personality formation, are barely explored [8]. Thus, this research aims to focus on three core factors – family environment, childhood trauma, and parent-child relationship – so as to identify their mechanisms in shaping adulthood personality traits such as confidence, social competence, and emotional regulation. Also, it examines the moderating role of gender during the process.

2 Research methodology

2.1 Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional questionnaire survey. A stratified sample of adults aged from 18 to 60 (N=145) was recruited, of which 49 are males (33.79%) and 96 are females (66.21%). By age, 81 are aged from 18 to 30 (61.38%), 51 are aged from 31 to 50 (35.17%), and 5 are aged from 51 to 60 (6.21%). It ensured diversity in both age and gender, expecting to construct a heterogeneous sample set.

In this case, the data were collected online using standardized scales – the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ-SF) and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ). With the responses with irrational answers and completion times, a total of 145 valid questionnaires were obtained.

2.2 Quantitative tools

2.2.1 Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ-SF)

The CTQ-SF employed a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Always"). It aimed to assess childhood experience from various dimensions, such as family atmosphere

($\alpha=0.87$) and trauma ($\alpha=0.79$). In addition to adverse experiences (e.g., being neglected and being physically punished or verbally abused), the evaluation items also included positive experiences (e.g., a warm family). According to the specific dimension, the higher the score, the more severe the childhood trauma or the milder the childhood trauma. [9]

2.2.2 Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ)

The simplified Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) adopted encompasses an E scale for extraversion, an N scale for neuroticism, a P scale for psychoticism, and an L scale (lie scale) for validity. Scoring follows a binary format (“Yes” for 1 point, and “No” for 0 points). Comprising 12 items, the EPQ aims to assess the subject’s emotional stability ($\alpha=0.83$), extraversion ($\alpha=0.76$), self-esteem (adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; $\alpha=0.85$), and social competence (a self-developed 5-item scale, $\alpha = 0.81$) [10].

2.3 Data analysis

The research used SPSS 26.0 for descriptive statistics. To ensure validity, the independent samples t-test, correlation analysis, and counter-example test were conducted.

3 Analysis and discussion

3.1 Bidirectional effects of childhood experiences on adulthood personality

Positive childhood experiences (e.g., family warmth) significantly influence adult self-esteem ($r=0.4$, $p<0.01$) and interpersonal competence ($\beta=0.35$, $p<0.05$), aligning with the basic psychological need theory (BPNT) [11]. The BPNT is rooted in humanistic psychology and grounded in the self-determination theory (SDT), noting that satisfying the three basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) is crucial for mental health and growth. According to the findings, a supportive, protective environment fosters healthy psychological development by satisfying the needs for belonging and autonomy. In contrast, individuals who have experienced severe, prolonged domestic abuse during childhood are subject to a 3.41-fold increased risk of emotional dysregulation (95% CI [1.89, 5.73]), in the absence of a social support system. Moreover, a cross-sectional study by Swedish researchers demonstrates an additive effect between childhood abuse and adulthood re-victimization, which underscores the important value of early intervention [12]. In summary, the survey results indicate a significant correlation between childhood experiences and adulthood personality traits. For instance, Individuals who enjoyed more positive childhood experiences tend to be more extroverted in adulthood, while those who suffered negative childhood experiences are more introverted. Likewise, the family environment is highly influential. Individuals who received adequate attention in childhood exhibit greater social competence, whereas those who were less loved prefer solitude.

3.2 Moderating effects of gender

By gender, childhood neglect has a significantly greater impact on emotional instability in females ($\beta=-0.47$, $p<0.01$) than in males ($\beta =-0.9$, $p<0.05$). This pronounced disparity may stem from the interplay between biological sex factors (e.g., estrogen) and the role with which society and culture endow females [13]. For males, father engagement serves as a positive factor for social competence, with its effect coefficient substantially outweighing the negative impact of “inadequate attention from the father” on social competence [14]. Biologically,

genes and sex hormones jointly influence the brain structure and function, shaping distinct behavioral patterns and personality traits in males and females. From an evolutionary psychology perspective, males and females play different roles in survival and reproduction, thereby acquiring divergent behavioral patterns in social communication and competition, as well as disparate personality traits. From a sociocultural perspective, family, education, and societal expectations contribute to these distinct personality traits through role shaping and behavioral reinforcement. From the cognitive behavior perspective, different cognitive styles and problem-solving approaches influence personality formation in males and females. Thus, gender represents an interaction of multiple factors in shaping personality differences between males and females [15].

3.3 Research limitations

In this research, the participants are mostly urban residents, and the interference of genetic factors such as 5-HTTLPR gene polymorphism is barely considered. Future research may focus on gene-environment interactions to explore the variable relationships with gender characteristics considered.

4 Conclusion

The adverse effects of childhood trauma can influence the development of adulthood personality via two primary pathways: neuroadaptation and social learning. According to the findings, these effects manifest differently across genders and may even exhibit transgenerational properties. Despite certain methodological constraints, the mixed method reveals the dual-path “risk-protection” mode for childhood experiences, providing crucial insights for family education optimization and policy formulation concerning mental health. Future research should integrate interdisciplinary knowledge to deepen the exploration of underlying mechanisms and convert research findings into feasible community-level intervention plans, thereby achieving whole-lifecycle management for personality development.

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