Negative childhood experiences and mental health: theoretical, clinical and primary prevention implications

John Read and Richard P. Bentall

Summary

After decades of ignoring or minimising the prevalence and effects of negative events in childhood, researchers have recently established that a broad range of adverse childhood events are significant risk factors for most mental health problems, including psychosis. Researchers are now investigating the biological and psychological mechanisms involved. In addition to the development of a traumatogenic neurodevelopmental model for psychosis, the exploration of a range of psychological processes, including attachment and dissociation, is shedding light on the specific aetiologies of discrete phenomena such as hallucinations and delusions. It is argued that the theoretical, clinical and primary prevention implications of our belated focus on childhood are profound.

Declaration of interest

None.

The study by Keyes et al., in this issue, represents an important contribution to our understanding of the processes by which the maltreatment of children leads to mental health problems. Just 20 years ago, however, it would have been difficult to get the paper published. Mental health professions have been slow, even resistant, to recognise the role of childhood adversities in psychiatric disorder. The 20th century got off to a poor start when Freud repudiated his original discovery that many of his clients had been sexually abused and decided, instead, that these disclosures represented fantasies. As late as 1975, a leading US psychiatry textbook insisted that the rate of incest was only one per million. It was not until the end of the century that epidemiological studies revealed the alarming extent to which adults neglect and abuse children. Pressure to respond to these findings came more from the women's movement than from psychiatrists or psychologists. Our introduction of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis in 1980 was not in response to abused children, but to Vietnam veterans. By the time we stopped the 'identified patient' but of parents and other family members, whose problems – often originating in their own childhoods – tend to go unnoticed.

The range of mental health outcomes for which childhood adversities are risk factors is equally broad. It might be quicker to list those not predicted by childhood adversity. Those that are include: in childhood – conduct disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and oppositional defiant disorder; and, in adulthood – depression, anxiety disorders (including generalised anxiety disorder, phobias and PTSD), eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, personality disorder, dissociative disorder and substance misuse. Moreover, childhood abuse is related to severity of disturbance whichever way one defines severity. People subjected to childhood physical or sexual abuse are more likely to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital; have earlier, longer and more severe disturbance whichever way one defines severity. 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People subjected to childhood physical or sexual abuse are more likely to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital; have earlier, long...
frequent admissions; receive more psychiatric medication; are more likely to self-harm and to try to kill themselves; and have higher global symptom severity.1

In another valuable contribution to this literature, in a recent issue of the Journal, Kessler et al analysed data from 21 countries.2 They concluded that ‘childhood adversities were highly prevalent and interrelated’. They also found that ‘childhood adversities associated with maladaptive family functioning (e.g. parental mental illness, child abuse, neglect) were the strongest predictors of disorders’. Of equal importance is their confirmation that ‘childhood adversities have strong associations with all classes of disorders’ and that there is ‘little specificity across disorders’. They acknowledge, however, that the World Mental Health Surveys on which they based their analyses (as did Wilkinson & Pickett)3 excluded psychosis. Many other studies relating to psychosocial aetiology exclude psychosis. Nevertheless, it is in this area that we find the most surprising findings.

Childhood adversity and psychosis

Until very recently the hypothesis that abuse in childhood has a causal role in psychosis was regarded by many biologically oriented psychiatrists as heresy. Although the public all over the world (including patients and their families) place more emphasis on adverse life events than on genetics or brain abnormalities when asked about the causes of ‘schizophrenia’, David Kingdon found, in 2004, that for every British psychiatrist who agreed with when asked about the causes of ‘schizophrenia’, David Kingdon on adverse life events than on genetics or brain abnormalities.

One of the greatest advances in this area in recent years has been the appreciation that childhood abuse is associated with a specific range of psychosis. In 2001, the work of John Read and Bentall4 was notable for the comprehensive analyses of the effects of abuse found in the mental states of people diagnosed with schizophrenia. In a review of the literature, they summarised their own findings and those of other studies, noting that the effect of abuse most consistently resulted in (for example) hallucinations, delusions, and specific structural abnormalities found in people diagnosed with schizophrenia. These structural abnormalities, they noted, are typically absent in non-abused people.

Many other studies relating to psychosocial aetiology exclude psychosis. Nevertheless, it is in this area that we find the most surprising findings. The authors of the one exception cited a flaw in the other 11 tested for, and found a ‘dose–response relationship’.5 For example, a prospective study in The Netherlands6 found, after controlling for history of hallucinations or delusions in first-degree relatives, that people who had been abused as children were nine times more likely than non-abused people to experience ‘pathology-level psychosis’. The odds ratio for ‘mild abuse’ was 2.0, but 48.4 for ‘severe abuse’.

The 2009 review7 also reported a relationship between childhood abuse and the actual content of hallucinations and delusions, as well as research demonstrating that abuse disclosures by people diagnosed with schizophrenia are reliable. It cites seven studies of first-episode psychosis that confirm the relationship between adverse childhood events and negative outcomes. Another review8 concluded: ‘There is now considerable evidence of an association between child sexual abuse and psychosis. This relationship is at least as strong as, and may be stronger than, that with other mental disorders.’

Many researchers, such as Keyes and colleagues,9 are now exploring the mechanisms and processes by which events in childhood can lead to mental health problems years later. For example, in an attempt to generate a genuinely integrated psycho-socio-biological approach,10 the traumatic neuro-developmental model11 of psychosis (proposed by J.R. and colleagues) draws on the evidence that the biochemical and structural abnormalities found in people diagnosed with schizophrenia, which have often been portrayed as evidence of a ‘brain disease’, are also found in the brains of traumatised children. Animal research, in which it has been possible to examine the effects of adversity in precisely controlled conditions, supports this general framework, showing, for example, that victimisation can lead to sensitisation of the dopamine system, which has long been thought to play a role in psychosis.

At a psychological level, researchers have focused on mechanisms that might mediate between childhood adversity and later mental health problems, including attachment, dissociation, psychodynamic defences, coping responses, impaired access to social support, and revictimisation.5,8,9 This research has the potential to uncover specificities in the effects of adversity which may be difficult to see when only broad diagnoses are considered. For example, childhood sexual trauma appears to have a specific effect on the risk of hallucinations, which may reflect a long-term impact on the processes underlying source monitoring (the ability to differentiate internal and external stimuli); whereas attachment difficulties and more chronic victimisation, for example bullying, may increase the risk of paranoid delusions by affecting the way that individuals appraise unpleasant experiences.10

Implications

The implications of our having finally taken seriously the causal role of childhood adversity are profound. Clinically, the first step is to ask about childhood events in order to facilitate meaningful formulations and comprehensive treatment plans. This is still not happening routinely in many services.11 The impact of the introduction of National Health Service guidelines in 2008 remains to be seen.12

The most important implication is in the domain of primary prevention. George Albee13 put it succinctly:

‘Primary prevention research inevitably will make clear the relationship between social pathology and psychopathology and then will work to change social and political structures in the interests of social justice. It is as simple and as difficult as that’.

References


Ashanti fertility dolls (Akua’ba)

Malcolm P. Weller

“Belief in myths allows the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.”
John F. Kennedy

In superstitions, intuitive concepts and spurious attribution coexist with acquired rational knowledge. In animals ‘superstitious learning’ based on intermittent rewards, unlike the withdrawal of predictable reward, is difficult to extinguish.

It might be thought that increasing environmental control would reduce reliance on unverified beliefs. Nevertheless, despite the conflict with religious prohibitions, in American society approximately one quarter believe in astrology, clairvoyance, ghosts and communication with the dead. Such beliefs, and good-luck charms, are often important parts of people’s lives.

Akua’ba (from Akua, a day-name for a female born on a Wednesday, and ba, child; hence, Akua’s child) refers to the fertility doll carved from wood by the Ashanti (more correctly, Asante), a major ethnic group of the Ashanti Region of Ghana. At their height they dominated most of Ghana, as well as parts of Togo and the Ivory Coast.

Fertility dolls are recommended by a herbalist, or generally a priest, and the woodcarver has high status, reinforcing prevailing belief. Like normal children, they are dressed and tied to the back, or form part of a home shrine when not being carried.

The line of descent in Ashanti culture is matrilineal. Dolls are thought to represent an ideal of feminine beauty, the likelihood of having a beautiful female child being increased in those who carry the doll. Accordingly, the dolls were also carried by pregnant women, but more often by infertile women. Apart from the normal desire for motherhood, infertility could raise suspicions of witchcraft. Because of the premium on fertility and the stress of infertility, associated physiological perturbations might be thought to aggravate infertility.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that women’s fertility is lower in stressful circumstances and that conception is more frequent during or after a holiday, or after adoption, following a protracted period of infertility. The idea that stress limits fertility would be a natural barrier to population expansion at times of drought and famine and would be a mechanism for balancing population to resources. In support of these ideas, extreme weight loss, as in anorexia nervosa, leads to amenorrhea. Ovulation in the Kung of the Northern Kalahari desert area of Botswana, a non-contraceptive using population with a low fertility and a birth space interval of greater than 3 years, is linked to the rains, but otherwise there is no evidence to support these suppositions in humans when objective data are rigorously analysed, even in artificial fertility treatment.

It is estimated that one in three or four Ashanti women possessed a doll. Ironically, fertility in Ghana is low compared with most other African countries. The elevation of anecdote over evidence might be summarised in the present example by saying that the wish to mother is the thought.

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References available on request to Professor Malcolm P. Weller, School of Health and Social Sciences, Middlesex University, email: psychiatry@weller.tv. Image © Skeptiseum. Reproduced with permission.
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