

Proceeding Paper

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Empathy: The Role of Interparental Conflict [†]

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Abstract: The literature shows that adverse life experiences may harm individuals. The main objectives of this research were to study the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and empathy in adulthood and analyse differences between victims and nonvictims of interparental conflict. Our research evidenced that adverse childhood experiences affect individuals' empathy in adulthood, and victims of interparental violence experienced other childhood victimization.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences; empathy; interparental conflict



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1. Introduction

Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) have a negative impact in the short and long term on victims' lives. Some authors define ACE as the experience of emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional neglect and physical neglect, parental divorce, exposure to violence, substance abuse, mental illness or suicide in the family environment, and/or the arrest of a family member [1,2]. The impact of adverse experiences in childhood can be established at psychological, emotional, social, and behavioural levels in adulthood [3]. Some studies reported a relationship between child abuse and the lack of empathy [4]. Empathy is a multidimensional concept that includes affective, cognitive, and behavioural aspects and implies knowing what a person feels [5–7]. The severity of ACE regulates empathy, affecting individuals' relationships [8]. The experience of a disruptive and hostile family environment (e.g., interparental conflict) may result in a lack of empathy, being a facilitator of aggressive and antisocial behaviour in the victim. That may affect the development of individual's empathy showing a history of more unstable and less satisfying intimate relationships [6,8–10].

2. Materials and Methods

This study comprised 119 Portuguese adults (73.1% women and 26.9% men) with ages between 19 and 77 years ($M = 41.91$, $SD = 12.65$), of which 79 (66.4%) were victims of interparental conflict. Participants answered online to the sociodemographic questionnaire, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), and the Portuguese Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). The ACE assess the degree of exposure to adverse childhood experiences [2], and the IRI assess empathy [5]. Informed consent was obtained, and this study was conducted following the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki [11].

3. Results and Discussion

The results showed statistically significant negative correlations between physical neglect and personal discomfort ($r = -0.18$, $p = 0.47$) and between emotional neglect and

perspective-taking ($r = -0.18, p = 0.48$). Household substance abuse ($r = 0.22, p = 0.02$) and mental illness or suicide in the family ($r = 0.22, p = 0.01$), showed positive correlations with personal discomfort, which corroborates the literature [4]. We also found that participants who were victims of interparental conflict in their childhood had more experiences of emotional ($M = 9.40, DP = 17.70$), ($F(1,117) = 6.69, p = 0.003$) and physical abuse ($M = 12.15, DP = 24.27$), ($F(1,117) = 9.99, p = 0.002$), household substance abuse ($M = 18.99, DP = 26.92$), ($F(1,117) = 7.47, p = 0.007$), and mental illness or suicide in the family ($M = 22.78, DP = 32.81$), ($F(1,117) = 7.14, p = 0.009$) than nonvictims. These results follow the outcomes of other studies concerning the probability of experiencing several types of victimization [12]. Considering these results, it is crucial to develop preventive programs with children and intervention with individuals who experienced ACE, promoting empathy training [8]. For future studies, we propose to compare individuals with different ages, sex, and levels of resilience, who had suffered childhood ACE to study empathy differences in adulthood.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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