



Early depressogenic effects of receiving negative parenting on adult affective disturbance

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 July 2011

Received in revised form 9 May 2012

Accepted 17 May 2012

Keywords:

Parenting

Child

Adolescent

Adult

Depression

Life course

ABSTRACT

Guided by a life course perspective, we examine the influence of experiencing negative parenting early in the parental home on individuals' mental health through middle adulthood. The study is based on a three-wave longitudinal data set that spans nearly three decades. Multiple imputation is performed to retain the full sample of 7618 respondents. The data set contains contemporaneous reports of parenting received when most of the respondents (81%) were around age 12–13 (Time 1). It also contains the extent of their affective disturbance measured at three time points: around age 12–13 (Time 1), in their 20s (Time 2), and in their mid 30s to early 40s (Time 3). The results demonstrate that the apparent influence from early experiences of negative parenting on affective disturbance in the later life-cycle is largely mediated by the prior level of affective disturbance around age 12–13. The detrimental effect of early experiences of negative parenting on adult mental health may have taken place by late childhood or early adolescence.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

An important mission for adult mental health research is to document life stressors that contribute to depression. One environmental stressor that has been reported by many studies is early life experiences in the parental home (Hammen, 2005). For example, the cross-sectional results from the National Comorbidity Survey (NCS) demonstrated a direct link between adults' current mental health and their recollection of parenting received during their early years (Enns, Cox, & Clara, 2002). Other studies also reported an association between respondents' depression and their recalled early adverse experiences with parents (Bemporad & Romano, 1992; Bifulco, Bernazzani, Moran, & Ball, 2000; Mackinnon, Henderson, & Andrews, 1993; Overbeek, Vollebergh, Meeus, de Graaf, & Engels, 2004).

Evidently, early years in the parental home are crucial for tracing risk factors of adult mental health.

Guided by a life course perspective, our research investigates the timing of the effect of early experiences with parents on adult mental health status. We ask whether the reported effect of early negative upbringing on affective disturbance in adulthood may have taken place at an earlier developmental stage and become chronic afterwards. This distinction is important for our understanding of different stages of mental health trajectories that are linked to early adversities. Also, interventions may be directed to the life stage when affective disturbance first emerges and thus alleviating some of the long term detrimental effects on later stages in the life course.

1. Limitations of existing research

Studies to date on the effect of early experiences in the parental home on adult depression rarely examine the

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¹ Dr. Howard B. Kaplan passed away on October 9, 2011.

timing of the effect that has taken place. Due to the difficulties and cost of collecting prospective longitudinal data from early years to adulthood, almost all studies investigating early antecedents of adult depression have relied on retrospective reports (Schraedley, Turner, & Gotlib, 2002). Using recalled life experiences has a number of limitations. In some retrospective studies, depressed people are first identified before researchers trace back the causes of depression to their early inadequate upbringing (Coyne & Downey, 1991; Crook, Raskin, & Eliot, 1981). Using depressed people as a base point is criticized as “leading to biased overgeneralizations” (Garmezy, 1988, p. 32). Conversely, studies with an improved prospective design typically start data collection before the onset of depression and follow the respondents over time (Brown, Craig, & Harris, 2008; Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003). However, those longitudinal prospective studies still rely exclusively on retrospective reports of childhood experiences with parents. Although subjective interpretations of memory-based early experiences should be acknowledged on their own merits, the value of retrospective data would be greatly decreased if the purpose is to obtain data about early upbringing unaffected by later perceptions, emotional states, and behaviors. Recollections of early experiences tend to be distorted to fit in with current perceptions (Yarrow, Campbell, & Burton, 1970). Depressed people’s memory retrieval may be biased, with memories congruent with their sad mood being more readily accessible to them (Beck, 1967). As a result, depressed people tend to over report negative experiences in their past (Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993; Schraedley et al., 2002).

Some studies that are based on recalled data regarding early upbringing have also investigated mediating mechanisms measured in adulthood such as intimate/interpersonal relationships, parental roles, social arena, work, etc. (Bifulco et al., 2000; Kessler & Magee, 1994; Quinton, Rutter, & Liddle, 1984). Since these studies are unable to control for respondents’ depressive symptoms at a younger age, they are subject to alternative explanations. Early negative parenting might have contributed to the onset of depression in childhood or adolescence, which has become chronic henceforth and mediated most of the effect of early experiences on adult depression. In short, using recalled data to test adult mediating mechanisms between early upbringing and depression is at best speculative.

2. Current study

Our study overcomes some of the limitations of many studies that rely on retrospective data to investigate the effect of early life stressors on adult mental health. We use a three-wave longitudinal data set that has spanned three decades of the life course. The data set includes contemporaneous self-reports of early parenting received during late childhood/early adolescence as well as repeated measures of affective disturbance obtained at three time points: late childhood/early adolescence, young adulthood, and middle adulthood. The longitudinal data enable us to sort out the timing and pathways regarding the effect of early negative experiences in the parental home on adult affective disturbance.

Our study is guided by the life course perspective that has informed numerous studies in recent decades. Life course research shifts the focus of research from a short segment of a simple life stage to the full life course, emphasizing the long term and multidimensional social forces that shape individuals’ outcomes (Elder & Giele, 2009). Four paradigmatic factors that affect diverse life paths are initially identified: (1) constraints of historical time and place, (2) timing of lives – the age-graded roles and experiences, (3) linked lives – the embedded social ties, and 4) human agency – individuals making choices within constraints and constructing outcomes (Elder, 1994; Elder & Giele, 2009). Particularly relevant to our study are the social forces from linked lives embedded in the family and the timing of life experiences. In addition to biological ties, the linkage between parents and children are also reflected in shared environments, shared resources, shared stressors, parent–child interactions and so forth (Avison, 2010). The life course perspective sees earlier experiences as consequential for subsequent ones (Elder & Giele, 2009). Thus the life course approach focuses on the pathways from which early experiences are related to later outcomes. The life course perspective also emphasizes the temporal aspect of events, behaviors, and processes (Elder, George, & Shanahan, 1996). The timing of the effect is especially important because the effect may vary according to individuals’ sensitivities and vulnerabilities during a particular age-specific period.

The concepts of trajectories and turning points, which revolve around the issues of stability and change throughout one’s life, are central to life course research. A trajectory represents a continuation of a direction whereas a turning point refers to the departure from an earlier direction (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). The idea of cumulative disadvantage is frequently used to explain the trajectories from the socioeconomic origin to the increased gap in various outcomes in the later life (Hayward & Gorman, 2004; O’Rand, 2009). By the same token, the effect of other experiences in one’s early life may also accumulate and have their share in building the life trajectories. In their research on psychiatric disorder over the life-span, Kessler, Gillis-Light, Magee, Kendler, and Eaves (1997) point out that failure to bring in the history of disorder may lead to a misspecification of the pathways for the chain of events. By including the recalled early history of psychiatric disorder, they find that childhood adversity has the strongest impact on early onset of psychiatric disorder. The effect of childhood adversity, therefore, becomes weaker on later onset disorders, and largely insignificant on the long-term persistence of disorder (Kessler et al., 1997). Indeed, continuities in psychological functioning are often observed because subsequent levels of functioning tend to build upon previous levels (Rutter, 1989). Avison (2010) calls for an incorporation of children’s lives into the studies of mental health. It is imperative that the factors influencing early mental health status are documented for a complete understanding of the pathways. Our study on the effect of early negative upbringing on affective disturbance at different stages of the life cycle is in line with the life course perspective’s emphasis on linked lives, temporal distinction, and cumulative processes of experiences.

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