



Effects of childhood trauma on personality in a sample of Chinese adolescents[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Childhood trauma is a major public health problem which has an impact on personality development, yet no studies have examined the association between exposure to trauma and personality in a sample of Chinese adolescents. Four hundred eighty-five students completed the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ-SF) and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ). The CTQ-SF cut-off scores for exposure were used to calculate the prevalence of trauma. The possible associations between specific types of trauma and the EPQ subscale scores were examined. The rates of emotional abuse (EA), physical abuse (PA), sexual abuse (SA), emotional neglect (EN), and physical neglect (PN) were 18.76%, 11.13%, 27.01%, 49.48%, and 68.66%, respectively. Individuals subjected to EA, PA, and SA had significantly higher neuroticism (EPQ-N) and psychoticism (EPQ-P) scores on the EPQ compared with those who had not experienced EA, PA, or SA (all p values < 0.05). Significant positive correlations existed between CTQ-SF subscale scores for EA, SA, CTQ-SF total scores, and EPQ-N, EPQ-P scores (all p values < 0.05). Significant number of subjects in this adolescent sample reported experience of childhood abuse and neglect. Exposure to childhood trauma is associated with personality development in Chinese adolescents.

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Introduction

Childhood trauma is a major public health problem which has existed in human society for a long period of time (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009; Tang, 2002). Literature reviews have shown that prevalence rates of child trauma in western countries are high, with the rates of neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse being 34–59%, 19–28%, 9–10%, and 7–34%, respectively (Creighton, 2004). A review conducted by Lampe (2002) estimated that in Europe the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse was approximately 1–15% and physical abuse was approximately 5–50%. The study highlighted the need for research regarding the prevalence of emotional neglect or psychological abuse in Europe.

Several studies have examined the prevalence of childhood trauma in China. Chen et al. conducted a series of studies which found the prevalence of sexual abuse to be 12–25% (Chen, 2004; Chen, Dunne, & Han, 2004, 2006; Chen, Dunne, & Wang, 2002; Chen, Han, & Dunne, 2004; Chen, Ma, Cheng, Chen, & Liang, 2006). Pan et al., using data collected in several large-scale surveys, reported that the average prevalence of child neglect in primary and elementary school students was

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28–32% (Pan et al., 2005; Pan, Zhang, Cao, Luo, & Zhang, 2010; Pan et al., 2012). However, many of the empirical studies in this area have used non-standardized, non-validated instruments, such as chart reviews or single questions or items to assess trauma. Moreover, published studies have often focused on one or two types of abuse; fewer studies have included all types of abuse. Although an investigation using a standardized instrument (Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form [CTQ-SF]) indicated that the prevalence of emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse were 45.1%, 32.4%, and 25.5%, respectively, the cut-off scores for exposure were not used to classify study participants according to specific trauma categories (Zhao, Zhang, & Li, 2004).

Effects of childhood trauma

There is mounting evidence showing that childhood trauma has long-term consequences (Spataro, Mullen, Burgess, Wells, & Moss, 2004). Early trauma has been demonstrated to have a powerful effect on adult mental health (Chen, Dunne et al., 2006; Wolff & Shi, 2012). Exposure to early trauma has frequently been linked to childhood and adult psychopathology, including attention deficit and hyperactive disorder, depression and anxiety, and personality disorders (Cummings, Berkowitz, & Scribano, 2012; Foote et al., 2006).

It is possible that specific forms of trauma are linked to particular personality disorders. For example, sexual and physical abuse have strong correlations with borderline personality disorder, and physical abuse is correlated with antisocial personality disorder (Huang et al., 2012; Zhang, Chow, Wang, Dai, & Xiao, 2012). In addition, the relationship between individual personality and childhood trauma has been documented in few studies. Allen reported that trauma is related to neuroticism and openness to new experiences (Allen & Lauterbach, 2007). Another study suggested that early emotional trauma may be related to poor impulse control and interpersonal behavior (Rademaker, Vermetten, Geuze, Mulder, & Kleber, 2008). However, no studies have examined the association between specific forms of trauma exposure and personality in a sample of Chinese adolescents.

Purpose of the study

This study sought to determine the association between childhood trauma and personality traits. Four hundred eighty-five students completed the CTQ-SF and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ). The CTQ-SF cut-off scores for exposure were used to calculate the prevalence of trauma in this sample. Further, the hypothesis that specific forms of trauma and EPQ subscale scores might be significantly related was tested.

Method

Participants

The sample was comprised of 485 students from two public schools located in Jinan city (285 high school students from the Licheng district and 200 students from a secondary school). Jinan is a large city in the Shandong province in east China with a population of 6,814,000.

Caregivers for all freshmen in the two high schools (equivalent to sophomores in the U.S. school system) received a permission form. Because data on childhood trauma were derived from a retrospective self-report questionnaire, we selected freshman students in an effort to minimize the memory biases of the trauma experience.

Measures

EPQ. The EPQ is a tool for measuring personality dimensions (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). The EPQ yields extraversion–introversion (E), with higher scores representing greater extroversion; neuroticism (N), with higher scores reflecting less stable emotions; psychoticism (P), with higher scores indicating higher psychoticism, and lie scores, which measures dissimulation and the tendency for respondents to adjust their responses so that they are more socially acceptable. Each score is a sum of the responses (agreement or disagreement) for each dimension or scale. The Chinese validated version of EPQ is an 88-questions self-report measure of personality, which showed adequate reliability and validity among a Chinese sample (Gong, 1986).

CTQ-SF. The CTQ-SF is a 28-item self-report retrospective inventory designed to measure abuse and neglect for children ages 12 and older. It is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Never True* to *Very Often True*. The CTQ-SF contains five subscales, three abuse (Emotional, Physical, and Sexual) and two neglect (Emotional and Physical). Each subscale has five items and there is a three-item Minimization-Denial subscale to check for extreme response bias. Other traumatic events that may occur during childhood, such as the death of a parent or a major illness, are not assessed (Bernstein & Fink, 1998). The CTQ-SF has been shown to have high reliability and validity (Bernstein & Fink, 1998; Bernstein et al., 2003). The Chinese version of the CTQ-SF has also been shown to have good reliability and validity in Chinese adolescent groups (Zhao et al., 2005). In the current study, to capture cases with even the lowest severity of childhood trauma, cut-off scores for *low-to-moderate* exposure were used to classify study participants according to specific trauma categories. The CTQ-SF cut-off scores were as

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