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Childhood adversity, sense of belonging and psychosocial outcomes in emerging adulthood: A test of mediated pathways

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ABSTRACT

Childhood adversity is a complex issue with the potential for lasting effects over the developmental trajectory. Research has confirmed that people who experience significant adversity, hardship and trauma in early stages of development are at an increased risk of a range of negative outcomes at later stages of the life-course, including increased psychological distress and dysfunction, decreased likelihood of educational engagement and an increased risk of early parenthood. However, distal events exert their influence on later outcomes through various proximal mechanisms. One such postulated mechanism is a sense of belonging. This study investigated the role of sense of belonging as a mediator between experiences of adversity in childhood and psychosocial outcomes in emerging adulthood, amongst a sample of 254 young people receiving a range of social services throughout Australia. Results of three mediation analyses confirm that the path from childhood adversity to psychological distress and educational engagement is only weakly mediated by sense of belonging. No other statistically significant relationships were found. These results indicate that additional mediators are likely needed to more fully explain the effects of childhood adversity on psychosocial functioning in emerging adulthood. The paper concludes with a discussion of the relevance of belonging for practice in the field of child and youth welfare.

1. Introduction

1.1. Childhood adversity and outcomes for marginalised young people

Research with marginalised young people has consistently identified that experiences of adversity at early stages of the life-course are linked to poorer outcomes at later stages of development and across a range of life domains (Berzin, 2008; Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012; Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2008). While the bulk of this research has focussed on young people who have experienced out-of-home care placements, there is emerging evidence that young people who have experienced hardship and adversity share important similarities, regardless of their contact with the child welfare and out-of-home care systems (Berzin, 2008).

The concept of adversity has received widespread and multidisciplinary research attention, especially in relation to its broader links with developmental and psychosocial outcomes. A number of longitudinal, and large-scale cross-sectional population-based studies provide support for a potential causal link between childhood adversity, psychosocial development and adult functioning (Edwards, Holden, Felitti, & Anda, 2003; Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010; Schilling et al., 2008). Despite this accumulation of evidence, debate still exists about mechanisms through which distal childhood experiences, including abuse, neglect and trauma, exert their influence throughout the life-course. Some of this debate is reflected in the variability surrounding definitions of adversity, which can range from very specific instances of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional), to exposure and/or experience of violence and victimisation, to loss of family through death or divorce, family disruption through illness and/or intervention by the State, through to experiences of natural disasters (Jacobs, Agho, Stevens, & Raphael, 2012). The conceptual scope of adversity is further complicated by the timing

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of onset, the chronicity and severity of experiences, the co-occurrence of multiple forms of adversity, and the cumulative impact of these experiences over time (Schilling et al., 2008; Seery et al., 2010).

Given the considerable variability in the way adversity is defined and experienced, and its location as a distal risk factor for later outcomes, it is important to investigate more proximal, developmentally grounded mechanisms through which adverse experiences influence individual's psychosocial adjustment through the life-course.

1.2. Emerging adulthood

Emerging adulthood, defined as a period of developmental transition between late adolescence and young adulthood, has emerged as a significant theoretical and empirical stage of development in recent years (Arnett, 2000). It has been described as a period of substantial instability as young people navigate an ambiguous social and subjective position where they are no longer seen as children but not yet defined as adults. According to Arnett (2004) emerging adulthood is defined by five core characteristics, including feeling in-between (i.e., the subjective experience of 'limbo'), instability, exploration, self-focus and optimism. Fundamentally, emerging adulthood is as a positive and hopeful stage of development, where young people are provided with opportunities to fully explore, define and begin to consolidate their roles and worldviews. As such, identity development takes on increasing salience and importance during this developmental stage.

Emerging adulthood presents a different set of challenges and opportunities for young people considered 'at-risk' by virtue of early experiences of adversity (Hiles, Moss, Thorne, Wright, & Dallos, 2014; Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007; Propp, Ortega, & NewHearth, 2003; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). For these young people, the transition to adulthood typically occurs in the context of significant family disruption alongside involvement with the child protection, criminal justice and/or mental health systems. This has led some scholars to suggest that vulnerable young people experience a differential pathway into adulthood. For example, Berzin, Singer, and Hokanson (2014) found that while young people exiting the foster care system experienced the core normative elements associated with emerging adulthood, their developmental trajectories were marked by an acceleration of adult roles and responsibilities. For the young people in their study, adulthood was defined in relation to self-sufficiency and self-reliance, including financial independence and a sense of autonomy, with a lesser focus on identity exploration and the experiential feeling of limbo (Berzin et al., 2014).

1.3. Self-Determination Theory and the need to belong

Self-Determination Theory (SDT: Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides a parsimonious and elegant framework for understanding some of the core mechanisms underlying the development and expression of psychological ill health and psychopathology, while simultaneously providing insights into processes that can lead to psychological and eudemonic wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008; Ryan, Legate, Niemiec, & Deci, 2012).

SDT begins with the premise that human beings have an intrinsic pull towards growth, which is driven by three basic and fundamental human needs, namely autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy is defined as the experience of volitional and integrated action, such that an individual experiences his/her behaviour as originating from within the self and reflecting core values and beliefs. Competence is defined as an individual's experience of a sense of mastery or effectance. Finally, relatedness refers to individuals' experience of belonging and connection to others within their social environments.

Fulfilment of these needs occurs within social contexts that are supportive of autonomy, while needs thwarting has been shown to occur within controlling environments (see for example Chen et al., 2015 and Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011). These environments interact with individual differences in regulation style (internal versus external locus of causality) and motivational style (amotivational, extrinsic and intrinsic) to influence wellbeing.

There is a large body of empirical evidence supporting the major tenets of SDT. Specifically, there is support for its cross-cultural applicability (Chen et al., 2015), for the differential role of need satisfaction and need thwarting (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2015) and for the impact of autonomy-supportive versus controlling environments on psychological wellbeing and ill-health, respectively (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan et al., 2012; Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009).

Despite this body of evidence, the bulk of research has focussed on the need of autonomy and the impact of autonomy-supportive versus controlling environments. This is understandable given that satisfaction of the autonomy need appears to support wellbeing across various conceptualisations of the construct. Competence and relatedness, however, appear to have differential associations to wellbeing, depending on how it is operationalised and measured (Chen et al., 2015).

This is an important issue for a number of reasons. First, the principles of SDT have not been widely investigated with individuals who have experienced maltreatment, abuse or adversity. While there is no reason to suspect that this cohort will have qualitatively or functionally different needs, it is possible that in the context of maltreatment the need for relatedness becomes increasingly salient, particularly if the maltreatment occurs during early stages of development. Second, exposure to severe and chronic need deprivation across multiple domains may further increase the salience of the relatedness need, especially for young people who may experience obstacles to need satisfaction in various social contexts (i.e., family, school, community).

The attachment literature provides a theoretically and conceptually rich mechanism that can inform an understanding of the differential importance of relatedness for young people who have a history of adversity and trauma. Specifically, internal working models about the self, others and the world develop and evolve as an individual engages with his/her social environment (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Riggs, 2010; Wright, Crawford, & Castillo, 2009). These cognitive representations shape how individuals derive meaning from their engagement with others and how they perceive their place and value within their social worlds. Experiences of adversity in early childhood influence the development of functionally adaptive, but potentially biased relational schemas. Over time, these schemas begin to shape the way an individual defines him/herself in relation to others (e.g., unworthy, unlovable, overly self-reliant). Therefore, emerging adulthood, with its emphasis on identity development can be seen as a time of positive self-exploration, but also a time where maladaptive schemas can be further reinforced. For example, young people may be exposed to a variety of autonomy supportive contexts that nevertheless thwart their need for relatedness (Bartholomew et al., 2011). This may occur due to the compensatory strategies that develop as a result of need thwarting, which may actively function to diminish others' capacity to create environments where young people feel valued, supported and nurtured.

1.3.1. Relatedness and belonging

By definition the need for relatedness is a broad construct with a number of constitutive elements, including a sense of belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In a series of publications Baumeister and colleagues have argued that belonging is a fundamental human need defined by