EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND PERFECTIONISM IN ADULTS: A STUDY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Abstract

Adversity in life is somewhat inevitable, and the consequences of adverse experiences in childhood are vast and detrimental. It is natural to expect negative and, in a way, antisocial behaviors and attitudes from the individuals who have survived adversity whilst young, but it is also common for the consequences of such experiences to create adaptive, even prosocial behaviors in individuals; example being perfectionism. Perfectionism is often, cross-culturally, viewed as a desirable trait that fosters excellence. The present study utilized a correlational research design to investigate the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and perfectionism among adults in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The sample comprised 351 adult participants primarily aged 18-25, residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of the participants, 268 were female, 78 were male, and 5 chose not to disclose their biological sex. They were recruited using snowball sampling method. Participants completed a series of self-report measures to assess their adverse childhood experiences and levels of perfectionism. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire and the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale were utilized to collect data. The results revealed a significant positive correlation between adverse childhood experiences total score and total perfectionism score ($r = .471$, $p < .05$), suggesting a moderate association. Linear regression analysis showed that adverse childhood experiences total score significantly predicted total perfectionism score ($\beta = .471$, $p < .05$), explaining 22.2% of the variance.

Keywords: Adverse childhood experiences, perfectionism, adults, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

1. Introduction

Recognizing the critical influence of emotions on personal growth, ensuring the satisfaction of emotional needs in early years stands out as a potential driver for future success. However, the widespread acknowledgment of a stark reality cannot be ignored – a substantial portion of the population faces challenges stemming from early developmental adversities. These impactful experiences, as highlighted by Boullier and Blair (2018), necessitate a closer examination of their effects on emotional well-being during the formative years, as they can significantly shape individual life paths.

1.1. Background

The concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) was first introduced in the context of health outcomes by a comprehensive study conducted by the CDC-Kaiser in 1998, as outlined by Boullier and Blair (2018). Subsequently, there has been a growing interest in understanding the diverse impacts of ACEs on physical and mental well-being, behavior, life opportunities, and economic abilities of survivors (Hughes et al., 2016, Monnat& Chandler, 2015). These experiences, spanning maltreatment, abuse, exposure to harmful environments, parental divorce, dysfunctional family relationships, and neglect, can exert lasting impacts on individuals from birth until the age of 18 (Mosley-Johnson et al., 2019).

Transitioning to the realm of perfectionism, a psychological trait defined as the tendency to demand an exceptionally high or flawless level of performance from oneself or others, surpassing what is necessitated by the situation (Flett et al., 2022). Associated consequences are on a broad spectrum, including links to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other mental health issues (Drieberg et al., 2019). It is imperative to differentiate between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, where the former is viewed as 'benign' and even desirable, while the latter results in significant distress for the individual (Lo & Abbott, 2013). Despite the paradoxical nature of healthy perfectionism, perceived as an oxymoron, it is widely accepted and encouraged across cultures, possibly owing to its association with excellence

and goal-oriented behaviors. However, the potential drawbacks of perfectionism, including self-criticism, self-blame, guilt, and procrastination, may pose challenges in later life for individuals striving for high-quality performances in various aspects. Theoretical explanations and empirical data suggest that perfectionism exhibits both adaptive and maladaptive features (Stoeber et al., 2020).

1.2. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the heterogeneity of outcomes and consequences stemming from experiencing adversity in childhood. Specifically, the research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by exploring positive yet maladaptive traits and outcomes that may arise from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Convenience and snowball sampling methods were employed for participant recruitment, targeting a diverse group, particularly students, who were expected to be receptive to participation. The sample comprised 351 adult participants primarily aged 18-25, residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of the participants, 268 were female, 78 were male, and 5 chose not to disclose their biological sex.

2.2. Procedures

The study utilized university platforms and expanded reach through social media to efficiently gather a sizable number of participants. Data collection was conducted utilizing Google Forms. Information about the study, its objectives, and potential risks was shared with participants before distributing questionnaires. No incentives were provided to the participants.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Sociodemographic form. A sociodemographic form assessed participants' age, sex, history of mental illness, education level, and nationality.

2.3.2. Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACEQ). The ACEQ, consisting of 10 yes/no items, measured participants' experiences before the age of 18 (Sciolla et al., 2019). Each 'yes' response scored 1 point, with a maximum score of 10.

2.3.3. Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS). The FMPS, comprising 35 items on a 5-point Likert scale, measured four dimensions of perfectionism (Frost et al., 1990, 1993; Stöber, 1998). The dimensions included Concern over Mistakes and Doubts about Actions, Excessive Concern with Parents' Expectations and Evaluation, Excessively High Personal Standards, and Concern with Precision, Order and Organization. The scale was developed by Dr. Randy Frost and colleagues (1990) and Stober (1998).

2.4. Study design and data collection

The study utilized a convenience and snowball sampling strategy to enlist 351 participants. Data collection occurred online through Google Forms, employing a questionnaire that covered diverse measures, including a sociodemographic scale, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) questionnaire, and the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. Subsequently, the collected data underwent analysis using SPSS version 21, employing suitable statistical techniques to investigate the associations between the variables of interest.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Continuous Variables.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
ACE Total	351	2.08	2.13	0.870	0.130	-0.087	0.260
Concern over mistakes and doubts about actions	351	37.54	12.71	0.081	0.130	-0.768	0.260
Excessive concern with parents' expectations and evaluation	351	25.99	9.43	0.341	0.130	-0.924	0.260
Personal standards	351	24.93	6.07	-0.399	0.130	-0.362	0.260
Organization	351	23.32	4.73	-0.587	0.130	0.129	0.260
Total perfectionism	351	88.46	24.16	0.130	0.130	-0.454	0.260
Valid N (listwise)	351						

3.2. Exploration of correlation between ACEs and perfectionism

Table 2. Correlations Among Variables.

Variable	ACE Total	Total Perfectionism Score	N
ACE Total	1	0.471**	351
Total Perfectionism Score		1	351

- Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
- Significance levels: $p < 0.01$.

The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the strength and direction of the relationships. The correlation between ACE Total and Total Perfectionism Score was found to be significant (r = .471, p < .05), indicating a moderate positive association.

3.3. ACEs as predictors of perfectionism

Table 3. Model Summary and Goodness of Fit.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
1	.471	.222	.220	21.341	99.707	.000

- Predictors: (Constant), ACE Total
- Dependent Variable: Total Perfectionism Score

Table 4. Regression Coefficients.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
1	B		Std. Error	Beta	(Constant)
	ACE Total		5.353	.536	.471

- Dependent Variable: Total Perfectionism Score
- R=0.471, r2= 0.222, F (1/349) =99.709, p=0.000.
- ACE Total is a statistically significant predictor of perfectionism, explaining 22.2% of the variance.

This analysis explores the relationship between ACEs and their role as a predictor of perfectionism. The results indicate that ACEs significantly predict the Total Perfectionism Score, with higher ACE levels associated with elevated perfectionism scores.

4. Discussion

4.1. Insights into ACEs and perfectionism: Building on previous research

Our study contributes valuable insights into the intricate dynamics between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and perfectionism. Previous research on similar correlations has produced intriguing results, deepening our understanding of this complex interplay.

Chen and colleagues (2019) conducted a study revealing that individuals who underwent childhood adversity exhibited significantly higher levels of self-presentational perfectionism, along with an inclination to conceal imperfections.

Ying and colleagues (2021) explored the relationship between negative parenting practices and maladaptive perfectionism using the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. Their findings suggested that maladaptive perfectionism mediated the connection between negative parenting practices and non-suicidal self-injury in a Chinese adolescent population. Among various negative parenting practices, maternal rejection was notably associated with maladaptive perfectionism.

Similarly, Wilson and colleagues (2015) uncovered a positive relation between recalled indirect peer victimization and current perfectionism. These findings align with research by Dobos and colleagues (2021) on non-clinical samples, which identified positive associations between maladaptive perfectionism and variables such as childhood trauma, emotion dysregulation, and academic anxiety.

Our study builds on this foundation, providing further context to the intricate relationships between ACEs and perfectionism, shedding light on potential influences and consequences.

4.2. ACEs as predictors of perfectionism: Unraveling the dynamics

Our analysis delved into the intricate role of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) as predictors, unraveling their impact on perfectionism. Notably, ACEs emerged as a significant predictor of perfectionism, with the model revealing that ACEs accounted for a substantial 22.2% of the variance in Total Perfectionism Score. The statistical significance of the regression model underscores the noteworthy influence of ACEs on perfectionism, indicating a moderate positive relationship.

These findings suggest a nuanced impact of ACEs, wherein they play a role in the development of perfectionism. Interestingly, existing research, such as Chen and colleagues (2019), has identified childhood abuse, including emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse, as a positive predictor of self-presentational perfectionism and the pursuit of perfection. Moreover, Grad and colleagues (2023) conducted discriminant analysis, emphasizing childhood abuse and neglect as crucial predictors of perfectionism profile membership. Vlaicu and Petrăreanu (2023) further highlighted the broader impact of adverse childhood experiences on an individual's quality of life, linking them to perfectionism and burnout.

In summary, our research contributes valuable insights into the distinctive influence of ACEs on the development of perfectionism.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, our study identified a statistically significant moderate positive association between ACE total score and Total Perfectionism Score, indicating that higher levels of ACEs are linked to increased perfectionism.

Furthermore, ACEs emerged as a significant predictor of perfectionism, explaining 22.2% of the variance in perfectionism scores. This finding suggests that ACEs may have a notable impact on perfectionism levels in our sample, contributing valuable insights into the intricate relationships between adverse childhood experiences and perfectionistic tendencies.

5.1. Limitations

Acknowledging the cross-sectional design's limitations, future research should aim to establish causality through experimental or longitudinal approaches. Addressing potential biases associated with self-report measures by incorporating objective or observer-based assessments is essential for enhancing validity. To improve external validity, future studies should diversify samples beyond the specific population in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The exploration of additional variables beyond ACEs and perfectionism, as well as the inclusion of protective factors that may mitigate the impact of ACEs, is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding. Researchers are encouraged to consider a broader contextual framework to capture the complexity of factors influencing the relationship between ACEs and perfectionism.

5.2. Recommendations for future research

Moving forward, it is recommended to undertake longitudinal studies that trace the development of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and perfectionism over time, offering a nuanced understanding of their trajectories. Diversifying the participant pool across cultural and demographic dimensions should be a priority to assess the generalizability of findings. Supplementing quantitative data with in-depth qualitative analysis, such as interviews or focus groups, would provide richer insights into the subjective experiences linked to ACEs and perfectionism. Future research should explore potential mediators or moderators influencing the ACEs-perfectionism relationship, such as coping mechanisms, social support, or personality traits. Additionally, investigating the impact of specific ACE types on perfectionism could offer a more refined understanding for targeted interventions.

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