



## Brief communication

## Five forms of childhood trauma: Relationships with employment in adulthood

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## Introduction

Relationships between abuse in childhood and employment status in adulthood have been rarely studied. Tam, Zlotnick, and Robertson (2003) examined 397 homeless adults and found that adverse childhood events contributed to reduced participation in the work force. In 12 patients with schizophrenic-spectrum disorders, Lysaker, Beattie, Strasburger, and Davis (2005) reported associations between childhood sexual abuse and poorer participation in vocational rehabilitation. In 91 internal medicine outpatients, Sansone, Dakroub, Pole, and Butler (2005) reported associations between emotional abuse, physical neglect, and witnessing violence, and employment disability. In the most pivotal study to date, Zielinski (2009) examined 5004 nationally representative participants from the National Comorbidity Survey and explored relationships between physical abuse, sexual abuse, and severe neglect, and several employment variables. Participants who had experienced maltreatment of any type were approximately twice as likely than non-maltreated participants to: (a) be unemployed at the time of the survey; (b) have someone in the household lose their job during the previous 12 months; (c) fall below the federal poverty level with regard to income; and (d) live in a household with income in the lowest quartile of the sample distribution. Participants subjected to physical abuse fared least well in terms of employment status, and experience of more than one type of maltreatment increased the risk for employment difficulties. All the preceding studies suggest that trauma in childhood may have detrimental effects on employment in adulthood.

Given the scant studies in this area, we embarked on the present study to further examine relationships between childhood maltreatment (five types of childhood trauma) and employment status in adulthood (four employment variables). We hypothesized that childhood trauma would exert a negative effect on employment variables, particularly physical abuse.

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## Method

### Participants

Participants were consecutive internal medicine outpatients, ages 18 years or older, seeking non-emergent care provided predominantly by resident physicians. We excluded individuals with impairment of sufficient severity (i.e., severely ill, language barrier) to preclude the successful completion of a survey ( $n = 62$ ).

At the outset, 480 individuals were approached and 369 agreed to participate, for a participation rate of 76.9%. Of these, 328 completed relevant study measures. The average age of participants was 49.94 years ( $SD = 15.66$ ), ranging from 18 to 90 years. Most were either Caucasian (85.7%) or African-American (8.8%), with 5.5% being of other ethnicities. All but 7.3% had at least graduated high school whereas 30.1% had earned at least a 4-year college degree.

### Procedure

During clinic hours, 1 of the authors (JSL) positioned himself in the lobby of the internal medicine outpatient clinic, approached consecutive incoming patients, and informally assessed exclusion criteria. With potential candidates, the recruiter reviewed the focus of the project and then invited each to participate. Each participant was asked to complete a 6-page survey, and then to place completed surveys into sealed envelopes and into a collection box in the lobby.

The survey consisted of 3 sections. The first section was a demographic query.

The second section assessed 5 types of childhood trauma, using an author-developed questionnaire. Participants were asked if, "Prior to the age of 12, did you ever experience..." with yes/no response options. Individual items were: (a) the witnessing of violence (i.e., "the first-hand observation of violence that did not directly involve you"); (b) physical neglect (i.e., "not having your basic life needs met"); (c) emotional abuse (i.e., "verbal and nonverbal behaviors by another individual that were purposefully intended to hurt and control you, not kid or tease you"); (d) physical abuse (i.e., "any physical insult against you that would be considered inappropriate by either yourself or others and that left visible signs of damage on your body either temporarily or permanently or caused pain that persisted beyond the 'punishment'"); and (e) sexual abuse (i.e., any sexual activity against your will). We elected this succinct assessment because of our previous experience with this measure, which accommodates well to the demands of a busy medical clinic.

The third section of the survey explored respondents' past employment histories. The forthcoming author-developed queries about the employment history were elected because we believed that they succinctly captured a global profile of the respondent's lifetime employment experience. Participants were asked: (a) "Since age 18, how many different full-time jobs have you had in your lifetime?"; (b) "Since age 18, what percent of the time have you been employed, part- or full-time?"; (c) "Have you ever had any jobs that you were paid 'under the table' for?"; and (d) "Have you ever been fired from a job?" Queries (a) and (b) were followed by blank spaces whereas queries (c) and (d) were followed by yes/no response options. For firings, we also asked how many times. These four queries appear to have reasonable face validity.

This project was reviewed and exempted by the institutional review boards of both the community hospital as well as the university. Completion of the survey was assumed to function as implied consent, which was explicitly clarified on the cover page of the booklet. There was no funding for this study.

## Results

Of the 328 respondents, 141 (43.0%) indicated having witnessed violence during childhood, 50 (15.2%) indicated having experienced physical neglect, 147 (44.8%) indicated having experienced emotional abuse, 85 (25.9%) indicated having experienced physical abuse, and 75 (22.9%) indicated having experienced sexual abuse. Only 122 (37.2%) of the respondents denied having experienced any forms of childhood trauma.

The number of full-time jobs held during adulthood ranged from 0 to 50 ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 5.70$ ), but only 10 (3.0%) participants reported never having held a full-time job as an adult. The estimated proportion of adulthood during which the respondent held any employment ranged from 0 to 100% ( $M = 79.96\%$ ,  $SD = 28.93\%$ ). Although 70 (21.3%) respondents indicated having been employed 100% of the time during adulthood, the most common response ( $n = 88$ , 26.8%) was to leave the item blank (missing data). Of the 328 respondents, 97 (29.6%) indicated having had a job in which he or she was paid "under the table," and 129 (39.3%) indicated having been fired from a job. The number of jobs these respondents had been fired from ranged from 1 to 10, although the large majority (89.1%) had been fired from only 1 (64.3%) or two (24.8%) jobs.

The results of multiple regression analyses of employment variables as a function of childhood trauma and demographic variables are presented in Table 1. All predictor variables were entered simultaneously into each multiple regression analysis. The analysis of number of jobs fired from includes only those respondents who indicated ever having been fired. For the total number of different full-time jobs held during adulthood, the only form of childhood trauma that demonstrated an independent relationship was sexual abuse. However, when it came to the percentage of adulthood during which the respondent was employed, none of the forms of childhood trauma demonstrated a statistically significant relationship. The same was true for whether the respondent had ever been paid "under the table." With regard to ever having been fired, both witnessing violence in childhood and childhood sexual abuse demonstrated independent predictive relationships.

**Table 1**  
Results of multiple regression analyses for prediction of each employment variable as a function of childhood trauma.

Dependent variable	Predictor variables	Beta	t	p<
Number of full-time jobs Since age 18 $R = .28, R^2 = .08$ $F(9,304) = 2.79$ $p < .01$	Age	.03	0.57	.57
	Sex	-.10	-1.80	.08
	Ethnicity	.01	0.09	.93
	Education level	.04	0.74	.46
	Childhood witnessing violence	.09	1.44	.16
	Childhood neglect	-.02	-0.36	.72
	Childhood emotional abuse	.3	0.40	.70
	Childhood physical abuse	.14	1.87	.06
	Childhood sexual abuse	.12	2.02	.05
Percentage of lifetime employed $R = .29, R^2 = .08$ $F(9,223) = 2.21$ $p < .03$	Age	.03	0.42	.69
	Sex	-.03	-0.52	.61
	Ethnicity	-.02	-0.30	.76
	Education level	.25	3.73	.01
	Childhood witnessing violence	.02	0.30	.76
	Childhood neglect	-.04	-1.82	.07
	Childhood emotional abuse	-.15	-0.52	.61
	Childhood physical abuse	.05	0.55	.59
	Childhood sexual abuse	.01	0.15	.89
Ever paid "under the table?" $R = .41, R^2 = .16$ $F(9,303) = 6.61$ $p < .001$	Age	-.27	-5.02	.001
	Sex	-.09	-1.56	.13
	Ethnicity	-.03	-0.62	.54
	Education level	-.14	-2.53	.02
	Childhood witnessing violence	.08	1.32	.19
	Childhood neglect	.11	1.78	.08
	Childhood emotional abuse	.05	-0.70	.49
	Childhood physical abuse	.05	0.40	.85
	Childhood sexual abuse	.02	0.30	.70
Ever fired from a job? $R = .32, R^2 = .10$ $F(9,303) = 3.82$ $p < .001$	Age	-.16	-2.77	.01
	Sex	-.17	-2.95	.01
	Ethnicity	-.01	-0.11	.92
	Education level	.02	0.32	.75
	Childhood witnessing violence	.14	2.20	.03
	Childhood neglect	.06	0.93	.36
	Childhood emotional abuse	.01	0.15	.89
	Childhood physical abuse	-.03	-0.42	.68
	Childhood sexual abuse	.13	2.07	.05
If ever fired, how many times? $R = .36, R^2 = .13$ $F(9,114) = 1.83$ $p < .08$	Age	-.10	-1.06	.30
	Sex	-.13	-1.28	.21
	Ethnicity	-.14	-1.55	.13
	Education level	-.03	-0.30	.77
	Childhood witnessing violence	.17	1.58	.12
	Childhood neglect	-.04	-0.41	.69
	Childhood emotional abuse	.12	0.99	.33
	Childhood physical abuse	.13	1.05	.30
	Childhood sexual abuse	-.04	-0.41	.69

Note: Age was coded as actual age reported in years, sex was coded: male = 1, female = 2, ethnicity was coded Caucasian = 1, non-Caucasian = 2, education was coded high school diploma or less = 1, some college but no degree = 2, and at least a bachelor's degree = 3.

However, among respondents who had ever been fired, the number of such firings was not independently related to any of the five forms of childhood trauma.

## Discussion

Findings indicate that trauma in childhood has varying and differential effects on employment in adulthood, depending on the type of trauma and the individual employment variable under study. We found that sexual abuse in childhood was associated with a greater number of full-time jobs in adulthood as well as a greater likelihood of being fired. Likewise, witnessing violence was associated with a greater likelihood of being fired. However, the remaining forms of childhood trauma (i.e., physical neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse) did not evidence relationships with the employment variables under study after other demographic and childhood-trauma variables were controlled. In addition, trauma in childhood did not affect the total percentage of time employed in adulthood.

Among the various types of childhood trauma examined in this study, sexual abuse in childhood was statistically the most conspicuous, rather than a history of physical abuse, which was reported by Zielinski (2009). These differences may reflect nuances in the methodologies of the two studies, particularly the explicit manner in which the questions were presented to

participants. However, additional studies are needed to further unravel the complex relationships between various forms of abuse in childhood and employment viability in adulthood, particularly using measures to assess interpersonal functioning in the work arena as well as overall job achievement/prestige.

In comparison with the most relevant study to date (Zielinski, 2009), we used a primary care sample, examined two additional forms of trauma, and explored different employment variables. Despite these differences, the findings of both studies indicate that childhood trauma has a potentially negative effect on employment functioning in adulthood.

This study has a number of potential limitations. First, all data were self-report in nature. Second, the assessment for childhood trauma was succinct and tended to solicit more subjective judgments from respondents rather than the reporting of objective experiences. Because of this, emotionally disturbed participants may have been more likely to endorse histories of childhood trauma. Finally, the ability to generalize findings is unknown (i.e., this was a primary care sample). However, through assessing for broader types of childhood trauma and exploring different employment variables, we conclude that childhood trauma has a potentially negative effect on overall employment viability.

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