BEYOND CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES: UNRAVELLING ADULT MENTAL HEALTH IN POLY-VICTIMS AND NON-POLY-VICTIMS

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INTRODUCTION

Childhood experiences have a fundamental role in the cognitive development of individuals (Schouw et al., 2020). **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** can have a negative short and long-impact, leading up to consequences such as low self-esteem (Lopez & Almeida, 2020), increased levels of emotional liability (Almeida et al., 2023), significant functioning difficulties (Pereira et al., 2021) and negative thoughts, which may contribute to higher levels of neuroticism (Schouw et al., 2020), negative emotions, **anxiety** and **depression** in adulthood (Crandall et al., 2020). ACEs can also increase the likelihood of experiencing **poly-victimization**, which consists of an individual being exposed to various forms of victimization, such as abuse and neglect, and persist throughout life, impacting the individual's mental and physical health (Schouw et al., 2020). Conversely, **Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)**, such as having a close friend or a predictable routine, can strengthen emotional self-regulation (Crandall et al., 2020) and resilience (Daines et al., 2021), thus facilitating adaptation to changes (Daines et al., 2021), and enhancing overall **mental health** (Crandall et al., 2020).

AIMS: To **a) analyze the relationship between childhood experiences and depression and anxiety in adulthood**; and **b) compare poly-victims and non-poly-victims concerning childhood experiences and symptomatology**.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

This sample comprised **145 Portuguese adults**, 89 being women (61.4%) and 56 men (38.6%), between **18 and 64 years of age** (*M* = 30.73, *SD* = 12.81). From the total sample, **60** (41.4%) **experienced poly-victimization in childhood**, and 85 (58.6%) did not experience poly-victimization in childhood.

MEASURES

- A **Sociodemographic questionnaire** (e.g., sex, age).
- The **Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire** (ACE: Silva & Maia, 2014) → Evaluates childhood adversity.
- The **Benevolent Childhood Experiences Scale** (BCEs: Almeida et al., 2021) → Evaluates the existence of PCEs.
- The **Brief Symptom Inventory** (BSI: Canavarro, 1995) → Evaluates psychopathological symptomatology and the existence of mental disorders.

PROCEDURE

Data was collected through an **online protocol**. All participants gave their electronic informed consent to participate in this study.

RESULTS

Table 1. Correlations between ACEs, BCEs, depression and anxiety (*n* = 145)

	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Emotional Abuse	.607**	.226**	.368**	.423**	.270**	-.253**	.310**	.210*
2. Physical Abuse	-	.219**	.279**	.339**	.306**	-.236**	.211*	.079
3. Sexual Abuse		-	.172*	.040	-.048	-.186*	.032	-.090
4. Emotional Neglect			-	.182*	.218**	-.508**	.443**	.270**
5. Physical Neglect				-	.572**	-.262**	.152	.193*
6. DV Exposure					-	-.203*	.147	.156
7. BCEs						-	-.446**	-.302**
8. Depression							-	.788**
9. Anxiety								-

CORRELATIONAL ANALYSES

- **Positive correlations** between **depression** and: emotional (r = .607, p < .001) and physical abuse (r = .211, p = .011), emotional neglect (r = .443, p < .001) and anxiety (r = .788, p < .001); and between **anxiety** and emotional abuse (r = .210, p < .001) and emotional (r = .270, p = .001) and physical neglect (r = .193, p = .020).
- **Negative correlations** between **PCEs** and: depression (r = -.446, p < .001) and anxiety (r = -.302, p < .001).

COMPARISON ANALYSES

Poly-victims show higher levels of:

- **Depression** (M = 6.86, SD = 6.34), [F(1,143) = 6.670, p = .011];
- **Substance use in family** (M = .33, SD = .47), [F(1,143) = 6.72, p = .011].

Non-poly-victims show higher levels of:

- **Positive childhood experiences** (M = 8.79, SD = 1.78), [F(1,143) = 6.536, p = .012].

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to a better understanding of the associations between childhood experiences and mental health outcomes in adulthood.

Overall, **ACEs** were positively correlated to **depression** and **anxiety**, showing that individuals who experience such adversities have a higher tendency for experiencing these forms of psychopathology during adulthood, as supported by previous studies (e.g., De Venter et al., 2013). Our findings show that emotional and physical abuse were positively linked with symptoms of depression and anxiety, which is consistent with previous evidence that childhood abuse is among the most relevant risk factors for the development of psychopathology in adulthood (De Venter et al., 2013). Experiencing these forms of abuse can lead to emotional dysregulation, resulting in negative representations of self (e.g., shame, low self-esteem) and heightened sensitivity to social threat (Taillieu et al., 2016). Additionally, neglect, especially emotional neglect, was positively associated with depression and anxiety, consistent with previous findings linking neglect to mental health problems in adulthood (Hovens et al., 2015; Paquette et al., 2017).

On the other hand, statistically significant negative correlations were found between **PCEs** and ACEs, as well as with **depression** and **anxiety**, which indicates that individuals who reported higher levels of PCEs tend to exhibit fewer ACEs and lower psychopathology symptoms. These findings are also consistent with previous studies (e.g., Qu et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2021) and support the protective effect of PCEs against ACEs, contributing to better mental health outcomes among individuals who experienced adverse circumstances during childhood (Crandall et al., 2019; Crandall et al., 2020).

This study also shows that individuals who suffered from **poly-victimization,** which corresponds to the experience of various forms of victimization (Schouw et al., 2020), tend to report fewer PCEs and higher levels of depression and anxiety in adulthood. Poly-victimization often occurs in risky contexts, particularly when the individual is directly exposed to adversity in the family household (Qu et al., 2022). In some situations, the family may even contribute to an increased risk of maladaptive behaviors, fomenting substance use (Fernandéz-Artamendiet al., 2020), which can hinder these individuals' ability to adaptively cope with challenging situations (Becoña et al., 2012), thus allowing for the development of psychopathology in adulthood (Cicchetti & Handley, 2019).

Psychological intervention with victims has been proven to significantly enhance their mental health, reducing levels of mental health issues by recognizing the psychopathology and actively learning adaptive coping strategies (McLafferty et al., 2019).

CONTACTS

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REFERENCES

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