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Associations Between Early Life Adversity and Youth Psychobiological Outcomes: Dimensional and Person-Centered Approaches

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Abstract

Exposure to early life adversity (ELA) is associated with increased externalizing symptoms (e.g., aggression and oppositionality), internalizing symptoms (e.g., withdrawal and anxiety), and biological indicators of accelerated aging (e.g., telomere length) in childhood. However, little is known about how distinct dimensions of ELA, such as threat and deprivation, impact youth psychobiological outcomes. The present study includes data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a large population-based, birth cohort study of majority (approximately 75%) racial and ethnic minority youth born between 1998 and 2000 across 20 large cities in the United States. The present study includes a subset of the original sample (N = 2,483, 51.6% male) who provided genetic data at age 9. First, confirmatory factor analyses were conducted, which revealed four distinct dimensions of ELA (home threat, community threat, neglect, and lack of stimulation) when children were age 3. Second, latent profile analyses identified an eight-profile solution based on unique patterns of the four ELA dimensions. Lastly, latent profiles were used to predict associations with child psychological and biological outcomes at age 9. Results suggest that exposure to specific combinations of ELA is differentially associated with internalizing and externalizing behaviors in childhood, but not with telomere length. Findings have implications for personalized early intervention and prevention efforts aimed at reducing ELA exposure to protect against downstream negative mental health outcomes for diverse youth.

Keywords: deprivation; externalizing; internalizing; telomere length; threat.

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