

Title: Improving the Conceptualization and Measurement of Childhood Adversity in Health Research: A Dimensional Approach

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Abstract: Many childhood adversities have been linked to the onset of health problems in later life. Despite accumulating evidence for the role of early life adversity in shaping morbidity and mortality in adulthood, the mechanisms underlying these associations remain poorly understood, which hinders attempts to develop novel treatments and preventive interventions. Identification of core mechanisms linking childhood adversity with health problems will highlight the specific social, cognitive, emotional, behavioral and biological processes that should be targeted with interventions. However, existing work has failed to identify dimensions of environmental experience that influence these developmental processes in specific, and potentially distinct, ways. Here we argue that the distinct effects of different dimensions of early experience have often been oversimplified or ignored. Extant research has almost universally defined early life adversity according to descriptive categories (i.e., abuse, neglect, institutionalization, poverty) or has examined broad constructs that combine diverse forms of adversity together, often referred to as 'early life stress'. This approach not only obscures meaningful differences between types of experiences that are likely to have implications for understanding their effects on developmental processes that are relevant for later health but also implicitly assumes that very different environmental experiences influence health through the same underlying mechanisms. This lack of specificity constitutes a critical barrier to identifying the mechanisms through which childhood adversity impacts later life health. The field must move beyond the prevailing approach to one that attempts to distill complex experiences into core underlying dimensions. We have articulated a conceptual framework that does so, but has yet to be applied specifically to the study of physical health outcomes across the life-course. The proposed project expands upon our original framework that conceptualizes adversity along two primary dimensions, threat and deprivation, to articulate a broader set of dimensions that may have relevance for physical health, particularly in late-life adult samples. We will apply the resultant broader framework in a review of existing literature to determine whether different dimensions of adversity have distinct associations with different long-term health outcomes and, critically, with putative intermediate mechanisms. The outcome of the proposed work will be a novel approach for conceptualizing and measuring childhood adversity that will spark innovation in attempts to identify core mechanisms linking early life adversity with health outcomes. This is a necessary first step in developing targeted intervention approaches.