



Child abuse and work stress in adulthood: Evidence from a population-based study

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the association between child abuse and work stress in adulthood. We used data from the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) Mental Health, a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of Canadians. This study included all participants aged 20 years or older who reported being employed the past 12 months ($N = 14,581$). Child physical abuse, sexual abuse, and exposure to intimate partner violence were assessed in relation to several work stress-related indicators. Multiple linear and Poisson regression models adjusted for age, sex, education, household income, marital status, occupation group, and any lifetime mental disorder. Child abuse was significantly associated with greater odds of high work stress (IRR: 1.29; 95% CI: 1.16–1.43) in adulthood. More specifically, child abuse was associated with greater odds of job dissatisfaction (IRR: 1.69; 95% CI: 1.31–2.18), job insecurity (IRR: 1.56; 95% CI: 1.27–1.91), and self-perceived low support (IRR: 1.33; 95% CI: 1.22–1.46). It was also associated with high levels of psychological demand ($b = 0.348$; 95% CI: 0.229–0.467) and job strain ($b = 0.031$; 95% CI: 0.019–0.043). Examination of the Karasek's Demand-Control Model using multinomial logistic regression analyses indicated that child abuse was significantly associated with high strain (RRR: 1.39; 95% CI: 1.14–1.72) and active (RRR: 1.56; 95% CI: 1.28–1.90) jobs. These findings suggest the negative influence of child abuse on work experience. Success in preventing child abuse may help reduce work-related stress in adulthood.

1. Introduction

Childhood adversity is an important stressor in children and adolescents that has adverse life-long consequences (Masten et al., 2008). It can have devastating effects on the physical, psychological, cognitive, and behavioral development of children (Gustafsson et al., 2012). Child abuse is one of the most common and severe form of child adversity. Between 30 and 40% of children in the USA and Canada experience maltreatment, including physical abuse, sexual abuse and/or exposure to intimate partner violence during childhood (Afifi et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2017). Child abuse is well known to have adverse life-long consequences (Gilbert et al., 2009; Noll and Shenk, 2010; Springer et al., 2007; Springer et al., 2003). Corso et al. have shown that individuals who experienced child abuse have significant and sustained losses in health-related quality of life in adulthood relative to persons who did not experience child abuse (Corso et al., 2008). A recent systematic review and meta-analysis has shown that child abuse substantially increases the risk of adult depression and anxiety in prospective cohort studies (Li et al., 2015). Research has shown that child abuse

experience is associated with poor social functioning in adulthood, including impaired ability to form interpersonal relationships (Friesen et al., 2010; Mullen et al., 1994; Larsen et al., 2011). Victims of child abuse often feel socially isolated and fearful of others (Harter et al., 1988; Davis and Petretic-Jackson, 2000). They have difficulty to establish and maintain healthy intimate relationships in adulthood (Colman and Widom, 2004) and have lower rate of marital involvement and have greater rates of divorce (Bifulco et al., 1991).

Child abuse could also affect other relationships, such as work relationships and friendships. Employment provides people with the opportunity to interact with others. While unemployment rates are especially high among victims of child abuse (Zielinski, 2009), it is also evident that those who are employed would have more difficulties to interact with their colleagues and exhibit higher levels of work stress, and perceive lower social support (Sperry and Widom, 2013). According to the stress sensitization theory, childhood abuse physiologically and psychologically sensitizes individuals to hyper-reactivity to later stressors (Repetti et al., 2002; Westerlund et al., 2012; Kendler et al., 2004; Heim et al., 2000). As such, it is possible that childhood

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adversity increases vulnerability to work stress.

According to the Job Strain Model, also known as the Demand-Control Model, high strain jobs (a combination of high psychological demand and low control) have a higher risk of mental and physical illness (Karasek and Theorell, 1992; Karasek Jr, 1979). Indeed, evidence has shown that high strain jobs are associated with mental health problems, such as depression and psychological distress (Bonde, 2008; Araújo et al., 2003; Bourbonnais et al., 1996) and chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases (Eller et al., 2009; Kivimäki et al., 2006). Given that child abuse is also associated with greater risk of mental health problems in adulthood (Afifi et al., 2014; Weiss et al., 1999; Kessler and Magee, 1994; Kendler et al., 2000; Saunders et al., 1992; Afifi et al., 2009), it is expected that individuals who have experienced child abuse would have difficulty to be employed or to adapt themselves into work environment. Recent findings from the 1958 British birth cohort indicated a link between child abuse and adults not in education, employment or training (Pinto Pereira et al., 2016). However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has empirically examined direct association between child abuse experiences and work stress-related indicators.

The objective of this study was to examine the association between child abuse and several work stress indicators in adulthood, using several work stress-related indicators. It is hypothesized that experiences of child abuse would result in higher levels of work stress in adulthood.

2. Methods

2.1. Data source

Data were obtained from the 2012 cycle of the Canadian Community Health Survey - Mental Health (CCHS - Mental Health), a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2013). The survey collects information about mental health status, access to and perceived need for formal and informal services and supports, functioning and disability, and covariates. The CCHS-Mental Health used a multistage stratified cluster sampling design to recruit a representative sample of respondents aged 15 and over residing in the 10 provinces of Canada. The sample excluded residents living in the three territories, indigenous communities, and institutions, and full-time members of the Canadian Armed Forces. Data were collected between January 2012 and December 2012 using computer assisted personal interviewing. The overall response rate was 79.8%, resulting in a total sample size of 25,113 respondents. However, this study included all participants aged between 20 and 74 years who reported being employed in the past 12 months ($N = 14,581$). Detailed information on the survey methodology are available elsewhere (Statistics Canada, 2013).

2.2. Dependent variables

2.2.1. Self-perceived work stress was measured using the following item

“The next question is about your main job or business in the past 12 months. Would you say that most days at work were...?” The five response options included not at all stressful, not very stressful, a bit stressful, quite a bit stressful, and extremely stressful. Respondents who answered quite a bit stressful or extremely stressful were classified as having high self-perceived work stress (Park, 2007).

2.2.2. Job dissatisfaction

Job dissatisfaction was measured with the following item: “How satisfied were you with your job?” response options included very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not too satisfied, and not at all satisfied. Respondents who were not too satisfied or not at all satisfied with their job were classified as having job dissatisfaction (Park, 2007).

2.2.3. Job insecurity

Job insecurity was measured with the following item: “Your job security was good.” Response options included strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the security statement were classified as having job insecurity (Park, 2007).

2.2.4. Self-perceived low support

Self-perceived low support was derived from a combination of three items assessing whether (1) respondents were exposed to hostility or conflict from the people you worked with; (2) their supervisor was helpful in getting the job done; and (3) The people who worked with them were helpful in getting the job done. Response options included strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Respondents were classified as having self-perceived low support if they either strongly agreed or agreed with the first statement (i.e. on hostility or conflict) or disagreed or strongly disagreed to the second (i.e. helpful supervisor) and third (i.e. helpful people) items (Park, 2007).

2.2.5. Physical exertion

This variable assessed whether the main job required a lot of physical effort.

Response options included strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

2.2.6. Psychological demand

This variable was derived from a combination of two items asking (1) whether the respondent is free from conflicting demands that others make and (2) if their main job was very hectic. Response options of the three items included strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

2.2.7. Skill discretion

This variable summarizes the respondents' task variety at main work and was derived from a combination of three items asking about (1) whether respondents were required to keep learning new things, (2) whether their job required a high level of skill, and (3) whether their job required that the respondent do things over and over. Response options of the three items included strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

2.2.8. Decision authority

This variable was derived from a combination of two items asking about whether (1) the respondents main job allowed them freedom on how to do their job and (2) if they had a lot of say about what happened with regard to their job. Response options to both questions included strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

2.2.9. Job strain

Job strain was assessed following the Karasek's demand/control model, a leading theoretical model in studies of work-related stress that is widely used. In this model, job strain is measured as a ratio of psychological demands (i.e. quantitative workload or role conflict) and decision latitude (i.e. the ability to make decisions about how to complete job tasks) which includes skill discretion and decision authority (Karasek and Theorell, 1992; Karasek Jr, 1979). This model has been found to have good psychometric properties and to reliably measure the construct (Karasek et al., 1998; Pelfrene et al., 2001). Four psycho-social work conditions were constructed based on the scores from the psychological demands and job control items: active job (above median on both demands and control), high job strain (above median on demands, below median on control), low job strain (below median on demands, above median on control) and passive job (below median on both demands and control).

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