

The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Self-esteem of Emerging Adults

Ruimengyuan Zheng^{1,a,*}

¹Department of EHD, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 22903, US

a. kdk8ny@virginia.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: This study quantitatively assessed the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACES) on self-esteem levels in emerging adults, with a particular focus on a cohort of undergraduate students in China. The study drew 50 participants from three different Chinese universities using the modified and translated Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale and the culturally adapted ACE questionnaire. The findings confirm the profound and lasting impact of adversity in early childhood on self-esteem, particularly within the unique sociocultural framework of Chinese society. The study highlights the need for culturally coordinated education and psychological interventions to meet the specific needs of individuals with a history of ACE. Future research directions are suggested, highlighting the need for broader, more representative samples and longitudinal study designs to further elucidate the long-term trajectory of self-esteem development after ACE.

Keywords: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Self-Esteem, Emerging Adults, Chinese College Students

1. Introduction

During the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood, individuals face a complex array of new responsibilities and unexpected challenges. Engaging with the workforce, participating in society, managing family duties, and navigating personal relationships emerge as key developmental tasks during this phase, highlighting the need for a strong sense of self and resilience [1]. In this critical transition period, self-esteem becomes a crucial psychological factor, greatly influencing both the quality and progression of an individual's developmental path. Emerging adults exhibit an intrinsic inclination towards societal participation as a mechanism for fostering maturity and autonomy. However, the pathway to such developmental milestones can be fraught with unanticipated impediments, the severity of which may vary based on underlying psychological factors. Of these, self-esteem is perhaps one of the most influential, having been the subject of extensive scholarly discourse. Elevated levels of self-esteem in adolescents have been empirically linked with a coherent self-concept, facilitating a more discerning approach towards life choices and vocational aspirations. Also, it serves as a psychological fortress against stressors and depressive symptoms, thereby enabling a smoother transition into adult roles and responsibilities [2].

Conversely, a deficiency in self-esteem can engender a constellation of maladaptive behaviors and psychological ailments. Adolescents with diminished self-esteem often manifest self-inhibitory tendencies, which can precipitate a range of internalizing and externalizing issues [3]. Such a

psychological landscape not only corrodes pre-existing interpersonal relationships but also functions as an impediment to the formation of new, healthy social bonds. The culmination of these negative trajectories significantly elevates the risk of developing depressive disorders and other psychopathological symptoms [4].

Within the vast array of factors that may shape self-esteem, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) emerge as a pivotal point of scholarly attention. These events span a wide range of traumas from various forms of abuse to household instabilities and neglect, the repercussions of which extend far into adult life, shaping emotional well-being and psychological resilience [5]. Existing literature robustly substantiates the long-term detrimental effects of ACEs on self-esteem, revealing a causative pathway that extends into the critical years of emerging adulthood [6]. The toxic influence of ACEs aggravates the challenges young adults face, amplifying maladaptive behaviors and reinforcing existing psychological vulnerabilities.

It is worth noting that, it is crucial to examine these dynamics through the lens of Chinese cultural and societal norms. Unique cultural values, familial obligations, and social expectations inherent to the Chinese context may interact differently with self-esteem and ACEs [7]. Such cultural specificities make the study of ACEs' impact on the self-esteem of Chinese college students an urgent research priority. The imperative to explore this subject deepens when one considers the broader applications of this research. A comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between ace and self-esteem can serve as a cornerstone for designing culturally sensitive educational programs in this population [8].

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 50 undergraduate students from 3 different universities in China including 22 females and 28 males were randomly selected for this study. Respondents were restricted to undergraduate students born and raised in China, but ethnicity was not constrained. This was done to ensure that the children were exposed to ACEs in the context of China and growing up in the Chinese society. Researcher wanted to construct a sample base that met the research criteria but also had diversity.

2.2. Measurements

2.2.1. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

To penetrate the intricate veil of self-esteem, The study turned to the tried-and-true Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Translated meticulously into Mandarin and sprinkled with culturally relevant nuances, this 10-item scale served as the trusted tool for gauging the participants' sense of self-esteem.

2.2.2. Modified Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) questionnaire

The extent and influence of ACEs were evaluated using the adapted version of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire, as modified for and validated within the Chinese demographic [9]. This questionnaire, a self-report tool, comprises 10 items that scrutinize different facets of childhood adversity. These include emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, alongside elements of family dysfunction like neglect and familial strife.

2.3. Data Collection Procedures

Participant recruitment was conducted directly via an online platform after ethics committee approval. Consent form was obtained digitally, which outlined the objectives of the study, potential risks, and

guarantees of anonymity. Data were collected through a secure and encrypted online survey platform, and participants were debriefed upon completion of the survey and provided with psychological support resources they may need.

3. Results

3.1. Statistical Analysis and Initial Findings

The analysis commenced with descriptive statistics to detail the sample's demographics. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to evaluate the relationship between self-esteem scores and ACE scores, revealing a notable negative correlation ($r = -0.519808$, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicated a significant inverse relationship between the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences and self-esteem levels.

3.2. Regression Analysis

Subsequent analysis involved a multiple regression model to further investigate the impact of ACEs on self-esteem, accounting for variables as academic year and gender. The regression, conducted using the statistical software R Studio, aimed to dissect the multifaceted influences on self-esteem. The model's adjusted R-squared was calculated at 0.253, means that a quarter of the variation in self-esteem scores can be explained by the variables of the model. Notably, the ACE score exhibited a significant negative coefficient (-0.4575 , $p < 0.001$), establishing a strong inverse correlation with self-esteem. However, the coefficients for gender (-2.0450 , $p > 0.05$) and academic year (0.9989 , $p > 0.05$) did not reach statistical significance, indicating a minimal direct influence on self-esteem within this study's framework.

4. Conclusion

In methodology, researcher specifically targeted undergraduate students in China to study the relationship between self-esteem and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in a distinct cultural setting. Researcher employed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and a modified ACE questionnaire, both adapted to the Chinese context, to ensure accuracy and cultural relevance in measuring self-esteem and childhood adversities. The statistical analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between ACEs and self-esteem, aligning with prior research. This correlation suggests that higher ACE scores are associated with lower self-esteem levels among the participants. Notably, these findings indicated no significant gender differences in the impact of ACEs on self-esteem, implying that this relationship may be consistent across genders within this particular group.

The current study's results align closely with the broader literatures in developmental psychology. Hutteman et al. and Crocetti emphasize the critical role of a stable self-concept during the transition into adulthood [1] [2]. This period is characterized by significant changes and challenges, where a robust self-esteem acts as an anchor, guiding emerging adults through complex life decisions and social interactions. The findings confirm that adverse childhood experiences can severely disrupt this developmental process, leading to a fragmented self-concept and diminished self-esteem. The implications of reduced self-esteem, as highlighted in this study, resonate with the observations made by Mouatsou [3]. These authors note the array of negative outcomes associated with low self-esteem in adolescents, including increased vulnerability to mental health issues like depression and anxiety, and challenges in forming and maintaining healthy relationships. The study extends this understanding by demonstrating that these effects are not confined to adolescence but continue to influence psychological well-being into emerging adulthood. The Chinese cultural context adds another layer of complexity to these findings. Wang discusses the interaction between cultural norms

and psychological constructs, including self-esteem [7]. In a society where familial and societal expectations are paramount, the impact of ACEs might be more pronounced, making it harder for individuals to reconcile their self-concept with external expectations. This cultural dimension underscores the need for interventions that are sensitive to the values and norms prevalent in Chinese society.

5. Discussion

This study's results hold significant relevance for the development of educational and psychological support measures. Echoing Li's observations, it's crucial to establish support frameworks in educational settings that focus on the effects of early life adversities [8]. Tailoring these interventions to align with the unique cultural and social backgrounds of Chinese students is essential. Initiatives that focus on boosting self-esteem and resilience would be especially advantageous. These could include workshops, counselling services, and peer support groups. Additionally, training educators and administrators to recognize and respond to signs of low self-esteem and related challenges could be crucial in providing timely support to students. Beyond educational institutions, broader community-based initiatives could also play a vital role. These might involve awareness campaigns about the impact of ACEs and the importance of nurturing a positive self-concept during the critical years of emerging adulthood. Partnerships between educational institutions, mental health professionals and community-based organizations help create a supportive ecosystem for young people. Exploring the role of potential mediators and regulators in this relationship is another important direction for future research. Factors such as social support, coping strategies, and personality traits may play a significant role in how individuals process and overcome the impact of adverse childhood experiences. Given the cultural nuances of Chinese society, interventions must be tailored to fit these unique contexts. This involves not only language and communication styles but also an understanding of cultural values and family dynamics. Interventions should respect and integrate these elements, rather than attempting to impose a one-size-fits-all approach. For instance, programs could incorporate elements of Chinese philosophy and traditional practices that resonate with students. The involvement of families in these interventions could also be beneficial, considering the significant role family plays in Chinese society. Engaging parents and other family members in understanding the impact of ACEs and the importance of supporting young adults' self-esteem could be a powerful strategy.

This research offers important insights but also has certain limitations. The use of a small sample from a few universities in China restricts the wider applicability of the results. For a more encompassing view of how ACE impacts self-esteem among Chinese college students, future studies should include a broader and more varied group of participants, encompassing students from various regions and educational institutions across China. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of this study constrains the ability to establish cause and effect. Echoing Giovanelli's suggestions, adopting a longitudinal approach would allow for a deeper exploration of the dynamic interplay between ACE and self-esteem over time [5]. This approach would be instrumental in identifying resilience factors that could counterbalance ACE's detrimental effects. Investigating aspects such as social support, coping mechanisms, and personality traits within the Chinese cultural context is crucial. A better understanding of these elements is key to creating more effective support and intervention strategies for those impacted by ACEs.

References

- [1] Hutteman, R., Hennecke, M., Orth, U., Reitz, A. K., & Specht, J. (2014). Developmental tasks as a framework to study personality development in adulthood and old age. *European Journal of Personality*, 28(3), 267–278.

- [2] Crocetti, E., Moscatelli, S., Van der Graaff, J., Rubini, M., Meeus, W., & Branje, S. (2016). *The interplay of self-certainty and prosocial development in the transition from late adolescence to emerging adulthood*. *European Journal of Personality*, 30(6), 594–607. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.2084>
- [3] Mouatsou, C., & Koutra, K. (2021). *Emotion regulation in relation with resilience in emerging adults: The mediating role of self-esteem*. *Current Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01433-5>
- [4] Mann, M., Hosman, C. M., Schaalma, H. P., & De Vries, N. K. (2004). *Self-esteem in a broad-spectrum approach for mental health promotion*. *Health Education Research*, 19(4), 357–372.
- [5] Giovanelli, A., Reynolds, A. J., Mondì, C. F., & Ou, S. R. (2016). *Adverse childhood experiences and adult well-being in a low-income, urban cohort*. *Pediatrics*, 137(4), e20154016. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-4016>
- [6] Bhutta, Z. A., Bhavnani, S., Betancourt, T. S., Tomlinson, M., & Patel, V. (2023). *Adverse childhood experiences and lifelong health*. *Nature Medicine*, 29(7), 1639–1648.
- [7] Wang, Y., & Ollendick, T. H. (2001). *A cross-cultural and developmental analysis of self-esteem in Chinese and Western children*. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 4, 253–271.
- [8] Li, S., Xi, Z., Barnett, P., Saunders, R., Shafran, R., & Pilling, S. (2023). *Efficacy of culturally adapted interventions for common mental disorders in people of Chinese descent: A systematic review and meta-analysis*. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 10(6), 426–440.
- [9] Mi, X. Y., Hou, S. S., Fu, Z. Y., Zhou, M., Li, X. X., Meng, Z. X., Jiang, H. F., & Zhou, H. (2023). [Title in Chinese]. *Journal of Peking University. Health Sciences*, 55(3), 408–414. <https://doi.org/10.19723/j.issn.1671-167X.2023.03.004>