

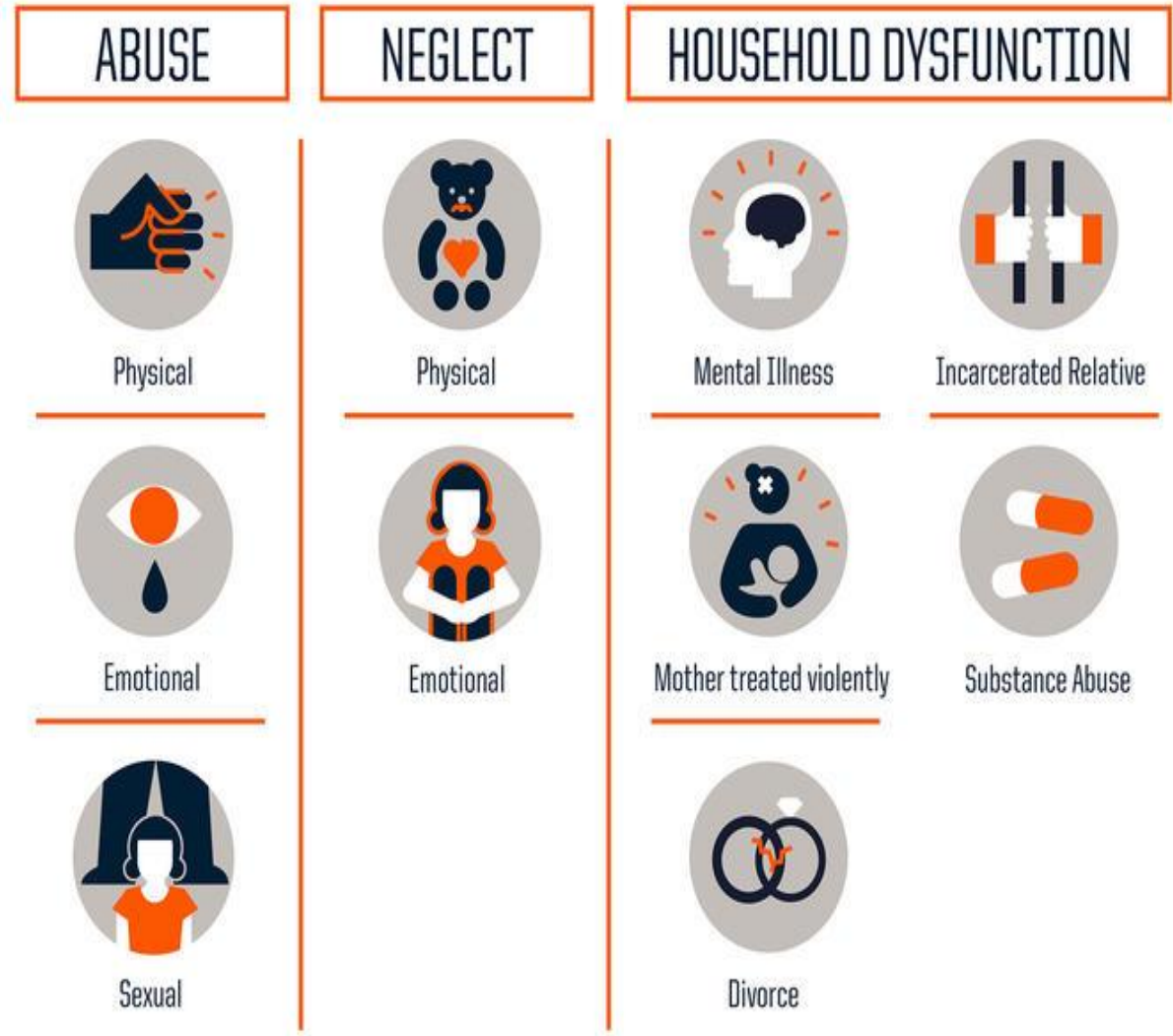
# The Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Altruistic Behavior in a South African Sample of Emerging Adults

A/Professor Leon Holtzhausen \* Department of Social Work and Social Development \* Faculty of Humanities \* University of Cape Town \*



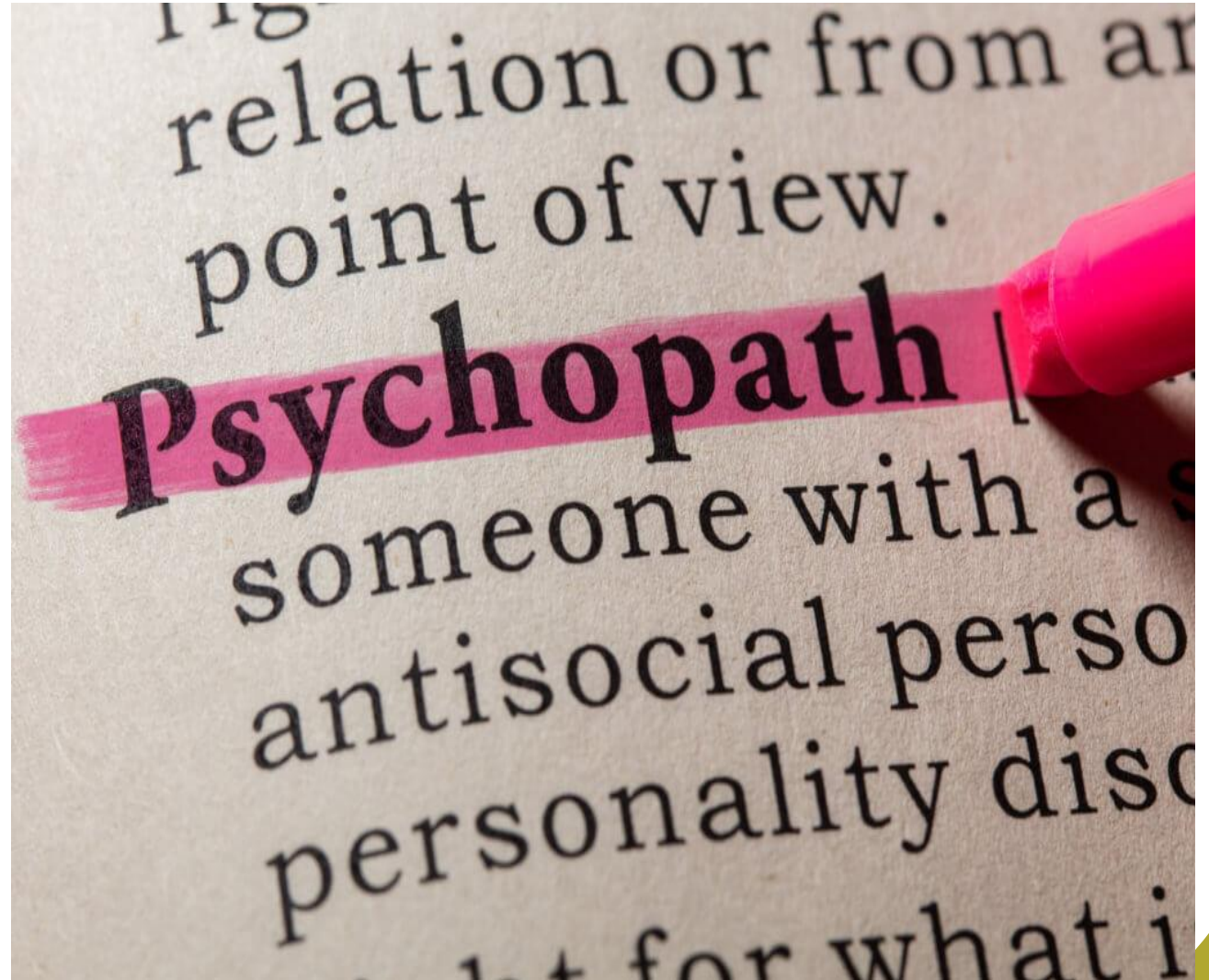
# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adverse childhood experiences can be defined as traumatic involvements and may include sexual, physical, or emotional abuse or neglect and adverse familial circumstances that occurred during childhood or adolescence (Carvalho, Maciel & Basto-Pereira, 2020).



# Psychopathic Traits

We know that elements such as childhood adversity, deviant peers and psychopathic traits increase individual's risks for various adverse outcomes like anti-social behaviors and deviance in young adulthood



- Developmental Psychopathology Theory explains the development of anti- and or pro-social behaviours (Cicchetti & Toth, 1999)

According to Cicchetti (2016), child maltreatment embodies a pathogenic relational environment that increases the risk for developing maladaptive behaviours across psychological and biological arenas. Also argues that the proximal environment (the nuclear family) and more distal factors (school, culture and community) often work together in a transactional process in undermining normal psychological and biological development in maltreated children (Cicchetti, 2016).

- Psychopathy Unified Theory of Crime focuses more on individual personality (DeLisi, 2016).

Psychopathy is seen as a clinical construct, encompassing key interpersonal, affective, lifestyle and behavioural characteristics that manifest in various antisocial behaviours. Psychopathic individuals continuously operate in pursuit of self-interest through manipulation or force with little to no concern for other individuals – a type of amoral personality with that act against the best interest of the other.

Lam (2012: 1), "*prosocial behavior, namely, the tendency for people to act voluntarily to benefit others can be regarded as a basic tenet of human nature and is also a cardinal virtue of all societies*".

Altruistic behaviour can be seen as a form of prosocial behaviour, which is voluntary and has the goal of increasing another's welfare (Batson & Shaw, 1991).

Lam (2012) Feels that altruism is characterized by an emphasis on the needs of others, concern for their well-being and finding a solution to their problems.

Altruism likewise includes a belief in the importance of the welfare and just treatment of others based on empathy - a characteristic which runs contrary to the behavior of psychopathic individuals described by DeLisi (2009).

# Elements of Altruism:



**1.** Can be disadvantageous for the actor/donor



**2.** Must be goal-driven



**3.** Must be an action or behavior



**4.** No conditions/prerequisites



**5.** Primary goal must be others' welfare, not a secondary consequence



**6.** Intention and motivation are more important than outcome

# Purpose of the Study

- The role of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in early development has consistently been proved to lead to specific deviant behavior, criminal justice involvement and crime.
- Very little research attention has been focused on the link between ACEs and altruistic behavior.

Margolin and Gordis (2000) highlighted the difficulties that physically abused children have with empathy during their middle school.

Carvalho, Maciel and Basto-Pereira (2020) found that specific ACEs (physical abuse for deviant behavior, and emotional neglect for altruistic behaviors) had notable, differential effects

Gomis Pomares and Villanueva Badenes (2020) determined that that individuals who have experienced high levels of ACEs often exhibit lower levels of empathy and prosocial behavior

- The purpose of this study was to explore the overall and differential effects of ACEs on both problem (deviant behaviours) and positive outcomes (pro-social/altruistic behaviour) in a South African sample of emerging adults.

# Research Methods & Procedures

- Research Design

The research design for this study was a quantitative, correlation study to explore the overall and differential effects of ACEs on both problem (anti-social behaviours) and positive outcomes (altruistic behaviour) in a South African sample of emerging adults.

- Participants

The sample for this study was 413 young adults between the ages of 18 and 20 years from a wide population of young adults from various locations in the community.

- Instrument

The Adverse Experiences in Childhood (ACEs) Questionnaire (Felliti & Anda, 1998) is a 53-item scale that aims to evaluate the occurrence of certain adverse experiences during childhood and adolescence.

The Deviant Behaviour Variety Scale (Sanches et al., 2016) is a 19-item scale that aims to assess the diversity of deviant behaviour over the past 12 months.

The "Altruistic Scale (A.A.S)" (Loureiro & Lima, 2009) is a 12-item scale evaluating altruistic attitudes.

- Ethics

Approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Humanities, at the University of Cape Town, South Africa

- Data analyses

Bivariate correlations and Chi Square tests for association were performed on the data to detect whether significant relationships exist between altruism, childhood adversity and deviance.

# Findings

- **Relationship between Deviant/Anti-social Behavior and ACEs:**

Strongest correlation between Deviant Behavior → ACEs = physical neglect ( $r=.431$ ,  $n= 368$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and domestic violence in the household ( $r=.350$ ,  $n= 370$ ,  $p<.001$ ). (Risk for deviant behavior increases when there's exposure to physical neglect and domestic violence during childhood physical neglect)

- **Association between ACEs and Altruism:**

A Chi Square test for association between ACEs and Altruism showed relationship between these variables was significant  $X^2 (1, N = 345) 26.643a$ ,  $p <,001$ . (ACEs influence/impact the development of pro-social behavior & altruism)

- **Altruism and Physical Neglect: ← Most significant impact on development of Altruism**

A Chi Square test for association was undertaken to explore the relationship between altruism and physical neglect. The relationship between these variables was significant  $X^2 (1, N = 397) 38.555a$   $p <,001$ . (Physical neglect during childhood impacts negatively on development of pro-social behaviors & altruism)

- **Altruism and Domestic Violence:**

The relationship between these variables was also significant  $X^2 (1, N = 398) 45.732a$   $p <,001$  (Exposure to domestic violence impacts negatively on development of pro-social behaviors & altruism)



# Discussion

- Children that experienced adverse childhood events could be more prone to the adoption of anti-social behaviors and less likely to exhibit altruism and engage in pro-social behavior later in life.
- If we consider that South African children that have experienced physical neglect & domestic violence might present with an increased risk for lack of empathy, we could argue that there will likely be lower motivation to act pro-socially and to the benefit of the other.
- This becomes important when we contemplate that one of the personal characteristics that nurture resilience is altruism according to Mrazek and Mrazek (1987) (Carvalho, Maciel & Basto-Pereira, 2020).
- Hypothetically, if we can identify ACEs like physical neglect & domestic violence early enough, we might be able to prevent aberrant behavior and increase altruistic behavior long term.

# Recommendations

- ACEs informed assessment and early intervention practices should be developed across multiple settings, including schools, child protective services, criminal justice agencies and family welfare organizations.
- Programmatic and policy efforts should focus on the development and implementation of culturally appropriate parenting programs to reduce the risk of child maltreatment (Barth, 2009; Sanders et al., 2000; Yoshikawa, 1995 in Garduno, 2022).  
Effective parenting programs should also include the following components: teaching positive parenting skills, enhancing parent-child relationships, promoting parental self-regulation and coping skills, addressing parental mental health issues, and providing social support and linkages to community resources.
- Parenting programs with a focus on parental supervision can prevent delinquency and serve as a protective factor against antisocial behaviours (Garduno, 2022).

- School-based programmes that increase a sense of connection and belonging - where the child is being treated fairly, have access to supportive childhood friends and trusted adults could be effective in promoting resilience and increasing pro-social behavior (Bellis et al., 2018).
- Garduno feels that policy efforts should help schools develop strategies to increase students' levels of connection with the school (2022).
- Further research is needed to explore the specific mechanisms through which ACEs affect altruism and to develop effective interventions and strategies for promoting altruistic behavior in individuals with adverse childhood experiences.
- By understanding the influence of ACEs on altruistic behavior, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can work collaboratively to develop targeted interventions that promote resilience, empathy, and compassion, thereby fostering a more altruistic society.

# References

- Basto-Pereira, M., Miranda, A., Ribeiro, S. & Maia, A. 2016. Growing up with adversity: From juvenile justice involvement to criminal persistence and psychosocial problems in young adulthood. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 62: 63-75.
- Braga, T., Cunha, O. & Maia, Â. 2018. The enduring effect of maltreatment on antisocial behavior: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 40: 91-100.
- Batson, C. D., & Shaw, L. L. (1991). Evidence for altruism: Toward a pluralism of prosocial motives. *Psychological inquiry*, 2(2), 107-122.
- Carvalho, F., Maciel, L., & Basto-Pereira, M. (2020). Two sides of child maltreatment: From psychopathic traits to altruistic attitudes inhibition. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 13, 199-206.
- Cicchetti, D. (Ed.). 2016. *Developmental psychopathology. Developmental neuroscience* (Vol. 2). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- DeLisi, M., & DeLisi, M. (2016). *Why Psychopathy as Unified Theory of Crime?* (pp. 1-13). Palgrave Macmillan US.

- DeLisi, M. (2009). Psychopathy is the unified theory of crime. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 7(3), 256-273.
- Garduno, L.S. How Influential are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on Youths?: Analyzing the Immediate and Lagged Effect of ACEs on Deviant Behaviors. *Journal of Child Adolescent Trauma* 15, 683–700 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-021-00423-4>
- Gomis Pomares, A., & Villanueva Badenes, M. L. (2020). The effect of adverse childhood experiences on deviant and altruistic behavior during emerging adulthood. *Psicothema*.
- Glenn CR, Kleiman EM, Kellerman J, Pollak O, Cha CB, Esposito EC, Porter AC, Wyman PA, Boatman AE. Annual Research Review: A meta-analytic review of worldwide suicide rates in adolescents. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*. 2020 Mar;61(3):294-308. doi: 10.1111/jcpp.13106. Epub 2019 Aug 1. PMID: 31373003.
- Lam, C. M. (2012). Prosocial involvement as a positive youth development construct: A conceptual review. *The Scientific world journal*, 2012.
- Mrazek, P. J., & Mrazek, D. A. (1987). Resilience in child maltreatment victims: A conceptual exploration. *Child abuse & neglect*, 11(3), 357-366.