

The Relationship Between Adverse Childhood Experiences, Gender and Deviant Behaviour Among Undergraduates in Malaysia

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Abstract

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are recognised as an important risk factor for the development of long-term behavioural consequences, including deviant behaviour. Although current evidence is beginning to address the function of ACEs in criminogenic behaviours in adolescents, the relationship between early ACE exposure and deviant behaviour in young adults has been studied to a limited extent. This study aims to measure the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, gender and deviant behaviour among students in Malaysia. The study uses a quantitative cross-sectional survey design in which a total of 207 participants who had previously experienced adverse childhood experiences completed the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACE-Q) and the Deviant Behaviour Variety Scale (DBVS). The results showed that ACEs were significantly correlated with deviant behaviour and that mental illness in the home was the most significant predictor of deviant behaviour, along with other ACEs. In addition, women scored higher on deviant behaviour than men. The results suggest that the prevention of ACEs could help reduce deviant behaviour in young adulthood.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), deviant behaviour, gender, young adults

INTRODUCTION

Criminal activities among young adults are on the rise in Malaysia. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been recognized as a significant factor in deviant behaviour on numerous occurrences. Malaysia, like other regions of the world, is witnessing an increase in crime rate among adolescents and young adults. Deviant behaviour can be defined as behaviour that breaches society's norms and rules, and it includes a wide range of actions such as theft, deception, and violence (Gomis-Pomares & Villanueva, 2020), typically starts in adolescence and relates to a greater probability of involvement in the criminal justice system as well as early mortality (Border et al., 2018). In 2010, the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (Institut Penyelidikan Pembangunan Belia Malaysia) discovered that out of 2,403 respondents, 94% were engaged in at least one dangerous behaviour from the five factors listed: sexual, substance abuse, rule-breaking, integrity, and criminal activities (Aziz et al., 2021).

According to Craig (2019), ACEs have been acknowledged as a contributing aspect of deviant conduct on several occasions. This is because deviant behaviours may serve as efficient temporary coping mechanisms to lower the amount of stress induced by encountering ACEs during early childhood (Gomis-Pomares Villanueva, 2020). According to attachment theory, those who have experienced inconsiderate and unreliable parental care, such as in ACEs, are inclined to create cognitive representations of their caretakers as unreliable, which leads to the formation of insecure and

disorganized attachment (Cooke et al., 2019). Poor attachments in childhood can raise a child's anxiety, resulting in suspicion of other people and reckless, violent behaviours in stressful situations (McGauran et al., 2019). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are the experience of or prior encounters with possibly distressing occurrences such as maltreatment and abuse, in addition to growing up in a traumatic situation (Boullier & Blair, 2018). These adverse incidents involve sexual, physical, and emotional abuse; physical and emotional neglect; witnessing domestic violence; living with a mentally ill individual; parental divorce or separation; parents involved in criminal activities; and alcohol or illicit substance abuse in the home (Jones & Peirce, 2020).

Experiencing adversity in childhood is not a usual occurrence in Malaysia (Veerappan et al., 2022). In 2021, the Department of Social Welfare (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat-JKM) reported 5858 cases involving children, of which 5631 involved child abuse. A developmental psychology study has looked into the impacts of ACEs on the probability of a variety of negative consequences during adulthood (Perez et al., 2018). These studies have shown that ACEs, such as abuse of children, neglectful behaviour, use of drugs at home, as well as imprisonment within the home members, have a lasting impact on physical, mental, and personal behaviour patterns and social consequences (Mazza et al., 2021). Moreover, ACEs have lately been a significant moderating study paradigm by sociologists and criminologists, demonstrating that ACEs are linked to delinquent behaviour, violent behaviour, and severe criminal behaviour or actions (Muniz et al., 2019).

Significant number of researches have discovered that specific ACEs could contribute to specific maladaptive behaviours (Gomis-Pomares & Villanueva, 2020). According to social learning theory, criminal behaviour has a greater probability of being imitated when individuals are exposed to deviant or criminal behaviour (Klein & Cooper, 2018). The theory states that individuals who have suffered as victims of maltreatment or encountered aggression are more prone to produce violent actions in their later years, procreating the cycle of abuse in adulthood (Martins et al., 2021). In particular, ACEs were previously reported to raise the likelihood of youth drug use (Garrido et al., 2018). For example, a past study by Caridade et al. (2019) discovered that an extensive number of youths began using numerous types of substances at a young age while also engaging in less sufficient and functional parental involvement.

Furthermore, understanding the manner in which deviance happens and varies between cultures is critical to understanding how each individual behaves from their own perspective (Gomis-Pomares et al., 2022). Malaysia is made up of people from different races, ethnic groups and religions (Wahab et al., 2021). Thus, the occurrence of deviance depends on an individual's perspective based on their racial background, ethnic group and religion. Taken together, these findings suggest that ACEs may play a crucial role in understanding adolescent criminal behaviour. However, the effects of ACEs on deviant behaviour in young adults have not yet been adequately studied.

Even though current findings have started to address the function of ACEs in criminally productive behaviours in adolescents, limited research has examined the relationship between early ACE exposure and deviant behaviour in young adults, with a focus on ages 18-26. The purpose of this study is therefore to determine the links between ACEs, gender and deviant behaviour in the lives of young adults among undergraduate students in Malaysia. The following hypotheses are investigated:

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant relationship between adverse childhood experiences and deviant behaviour among undergraduates in Malaysia,

Hypothesis 2: The subdomain of Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) will significantly predict deviant behaviour

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant difference in the deviant behaviour scores of males and females.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The research design that was employed in this current research is a quantitative cross-sectional design using survey. The sampling technique used to select participants for the study was purposive sampling. The survey was created in an online format using Google Form and included informed consent, demographic information, the ACE questionnaire, and the DBVS.

Instruments

The Participant Demographic Form was used to collect the demographic information of the participants, which includes age, gender, ethnicity, and university.

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)

The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998) assesses adverse experiences in childhood and adolescence, including abuse, neglect and dysfunction in the home throughout the first 18 years of life (Gomis-Pomares & Villanueva, 2020). The ACEs questionnaire consists of 10 items that allude to three categories: abuse (physical, emotional and sexual), neglect (physical and emotional), as well as household dysfunction (parental separation or divorce, witnessing domestic violence, household substance abuse, mental illness in the household and incarceration of a member of the household) (Pinto et al., 2014). The ACEs questionnaire comprises closed-ended questions and is answered using a dichotomous scale (yes/no) (Gomis-Pomares & Villanueva, 2020). The "total ACE score" (range: 0-10) is generated by adding the overall number of responses and is utilised to evaluate the cumulative impact of several ACEs (Poole et al., 2018). Higher "yes" scores show a high occurrence of ACEs.

The Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS)

The Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS) (Sanches et al., 2016) is a self-report measure that encompasses both unlawful behaviour, such as operating a vehicle without a driver's licence and non-criminal rule-breaking, such as dishonesty or absenteeism without parental authorization (Gomis-Pomares et al., 2022). The DBVS, composed of 19 items, responded on a dichotomous scale (yes/no) concerning whether the subjects engaged in any of the 19 deviant behaviours in the past year (Holtzhausen & Campbell, 2021). The sum of "yes" responses yields the overall score for deviant behaviour (Gomis-Pomares et al., 2022), signifying a wide variety of deviant behaviours performed.

Procedures

A link was generated and distributed to the desired targeted participant through online channels such as email emails social media after receiving approval from the university ethics committee. When the survey link was clicked, the informed consent form was displayed on the first page of the online survey. The informed consent form informs respondents of the purpose and nature of the study, potential risks and discomforts, benefits, a statement of confidentiality, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, and the researcher's information. Participants must read and understand the information on the first page of the online survey. Because the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) questionnaire questions address stressful experiences, there is a potential risk of participants becoming psychologically or emotionally distressed. The corrective action that will be taken is to provide a debriefing section after the survey that includes researcher's contact information and psychological counselling services in case participants become distressed or have questions about the study after the survey.

Participants

The total sample for this study consisted of 207 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 26 years, with 105 (34.2%) females and 102 (33.2%) males from a wide population of young adults from various locations in Malaysia. With regards to ethnicity, 22.5% are Malays, followed by 18.6% of Indians, 15.3% of Chinese and 11.1% of other ethnic groups.

Descriptive analysis includes the distribution of demographic information about the participants in respect of age, gender, ethnicity and university, as well as the scores of the ACE questionnaire and DBVS in respect of the mean scores of males and females for further analysis. The sample is predominantly female (34.2%) from a wide range of universities, participants from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) have the highest number of participants at 35 (11.4%), followed by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) at 27 (8.8%), and Universiti Malaya (UM) at 27 (8.8%). The table also revealed that the mean age of participants was 23.78. The highest frequency in terms of age bracket is 23 years old or 16.9% of the total sample size ($n = 207$).

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis of Variables

It is possible to observe that of the total number of participants ($n = 207$), experienced at least one ACE (Table 1). The most prominent ACE was having to experience emotional abuse (46.3%), followed by physical abuse (38.4%), witnessing household violence (35.5%), emotional neglect (28.7%), parental separation or divorce (26.7%), household mental illness (24.8%), household substance abuse (16.9%), sexual abuse (9.8%), household member incarceration (8.5%), and physical neglect (6.5%).

Table 1 The prevalence of each ACE item among undergraduates in Malaysia

Label	ACE Items	Frequency (yes)	Percentage (%)
ACE1	Emotional Abuse	142	46.3
ACE2	Physical Abuse	118	38.4
ACE3	Sexual Abuse	30	9.8
ACE4	Emotional Neglect	88	28.7
ACE5	Physical Neglect	20	6.5
ACE6	Parental Separation/Divorce	82	26.7
ACE7	Witnessing Household Violence	109	35.5
ACE8	Household Substance Abuse	52	16.9
ACE9	Household Mental Illness	76	24.8
ACE10	Household Member Incarceration	26	8.5

Note: ACE = Adverse Childhood Experience

In respect to deviant behaviour, the most frequently committed deviant behaviour by the participants in this study would be lying to adults (67.4%), followed by skipped classes to stay with colleagues, or to go for a ride (63.8%), stolen something worth less than 50 ringgit (54.4%), drove a motorbike or a car without having a driver's licence (52.1%), stolen something worth between 5 to 50 ringgits (51.5%), damaged public or private property (45.6%), skipped school for several days without parents' knowing (44.6%), done graffiti on buildings (40.7%), hitting an adult (27.7%), used a motorbike or a car to go for a ride without the owner's permission (25.4%), used hashish ("hash") or marijuana ("grass") (20.2%), carried a weapon (19.2%), used public transport without paying (6.2%), been to school or to class after drinking alcohol (5.9%), stolen something worth more than 50 ringgit (5.2%), broken into a car, a house, shop, or other building (92.9%), used LSD ("acid"), ecstasy ("tablets") or amphetamines ("speeds") (1.0%), used cocaine or heroin (1.0%), and sold drugs (0%).

The Relationship Between ACE and Deviant Behaviour

Pearson correlation was used to evaluate the relationship between ACEs and deviant behaviours. Result demonstrates positive significant correlation between ACEs and deviant behaviours ($r = .373$, $n = 207$, $p < .001$). This implies that when ACEs rises, deviant behaviours also rise, and vice versa. The correlation between deviant behaviour and adverse childhood experiences validates and coincides with an abundance of research and literature claiming that adverse childhood experiences could affect a child's behavioural growth, frequently resulting in the growth of more disruptive behaviours (Holtzhausen & Campbell, 2021).

The Subdomain of ACEs Is a Significant Predictor of Deviant Behaviour

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to test the predictors of deviant behaviours. Each of the ACE subdomain was considered an individual predictor of deviant behaviours. Results of the multiple linear regression in Table 3 indicated that there was a collective significant effect between the individual subdomain of ACE and deviant behaviour, $F(10, 196) = 6.805$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .258$. The individual predictors were examined further and indicated that emotional abuse ($\beta = .159$, $p = .016$), emotional neglect ($\beta = .168$, $p = .015$), witnessing household violence ($\beta = .346$, $p = .001$), household substance abuse ($\beta = .158$, $p = .013$), and household mental illness ($\beta = .272$, $p < .001$) were the strongest and significant predictors of deviant behaviour. In particular, having someone in the household experiencing mental illness would predict deviant behaviour in the future of a child. This demonstrates that not all subdomain of ACEs are a significant predictor of deviant behaviour.

Table 3 Multiple Linear Regression on Deviant Behaviour

Predictor Variable	β	t	p	R^2	F
Emotional Abuse	.159	2.429	.016*	.258	6.805
Physical Abuse	-.052	-.519	.605		
Sexual Abuse	.011	.167	.867		
Emotional Neglect	.168	2.447	.015*		
Physical Neglect	.110	1.758	.080		
Parental Separation/Divorce	-.129	-1.757	.081		
Witnessing Household Violence	.346	3.316	.001**		
Household Substance Abuse	.158	2.493	.013*		
Household Mental Illness	.272	4.043	<.001***		
Household Member Incarceration	.068	1.086	.279		

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The Differences in The Deviant Behaviour Scores of Males and Females

An independent t-test was performed to determine the significant difference in the deviant behaviour scores of males and females. Table 4 shows the overall results of the t-test for the 19-item Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS) among male and female undergraduate students in Malaysia.

Table 4 Summary of the t-test for the 19-item Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS) among Male and Female Undergraduate Students in Malaysia

Gender	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Female	105	1.62	0.15	4.23	<.001
Male	102	1.54	0.13		

Table 4 reveals that there is a significant difference among males ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.13$) and females ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 0.15$) in the scores of deviant behaviour, $t(205) = 4.23$, $p < .001$. These results indicate that males were associated with a significantly lower deviant behaviour score compared to females.

DISCUSSION

Although ACEs have been thoroughly studied as potential indicators for deviant behaviour, previous research has not properly evaluated the relationship between ACEs and deviant behaviour among young adults aged 18 to 26. To address these gaps in the literature, the current study examined the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, gender and deviant behaviour among undergraduates in Malaysia.

The Relationship Between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Deviant Behaviours

The first objective was to measure the relationship between ACEs and deviant behaviour among undergraduates in Malaysia. Upon analysing the data, the empirical findings confirmed the hypothesis that there is a significant positive but weak relationship between ACEs and deviant behaviour among undergraduates in Malaysia. This result is consistent with previous ACE studies (Holtzhausen & Campbell, 2021; Puskiewicz & Stinson, 2019) demonstrating a link between ACEs and deviant behaviour. This is an important finding, given that previous research on ACEs and deviant behaviour has focused primarily on adolescents instead of young adults (Puskiewicz & Stinson, 2019).

A possible justification for these results may be derived in social learning theory, since young adults who encountered adversity as children exhibit similar behaviours later in life. These discoveries might be attributed to the probability that experiencing ACEs at an early age can possibly normalise the behaviour for the individual, raising the likelihood that they will subsequently repeat the behaviour themselves (Miley et al., 2020). According to Klein and Cooper (2018) when individuals are exposed to deviant or illegal behaviour, they are more inclined to imitate it. However, this finding may also be justified by the fact that these young adults are discovering how to cope with conflicts using violence in manners that have been demonstrated to them (Gomis-Pomares & Villanueva, 2020).

The Subdomain of ACEs Is a Significant Predictor of Deviant Behaviour

The second objective was to determine whether the subdomain of ACEs is a significant predictor of deviant behaviour. A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine this objective. Each of the ACE subdomains was considered an individual predictor of deviant behaviours. Following data analysis, the findings indicated that household mental illness was the most significant predictor of deviant behaviour, followed by witnessing household violence, household substance abuse, emotional neglect, and emotional abuse. This finding contradicts previous research that demonstrates physical abuse as the most significant and strongest predictor of deviant behaviour (Gomis-Pomares &

Villanueva, 2020; Holtzhausen & Campbell, 2021; Miley et al., 2020).

Mental illness in the family was found to be a significant predictor of later involvement in deviant behaviour, which contradicts previous literature findings. A possible reason for these findings could be due to the different population of the study, as previous research only looked at Western populations such as African Americans, Americans and Latin Americans, but this study includes Malaysians. This shows that Malaysians who have experienced mental illness in their household have a higher likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviour in the future compared to the Western population, which has shown that those who have experienced physical abuse have a higher likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviour. This is an important discovery because, according to Cronholm et al. (2015), certain types of ACEs can have a differential impact on an individual population. Thus, the subtype of ACEs that is the most significant predictor of deviant behaviour varies by population group.

The Differences in The Deviant Behaviour Scores of Males and Females

The third objective was to investigate the significant difference in the deviant behaviour scores of males and females. An independent t-test was performed to investigate this objective. Upon analysing the data, the empirical findings revealed that there is a significant difference among males and females in the scores of deviant behaviours. This finding shows that, in comparison to females, males had a much lower score for deviant behaviour. This indicates that females are more likely to engage in deviant behaviour in comparison to males. Some remarks regarding gender in relation to deviant behaviours are worth making. This is because some of these distinctions between genders make a particular gender more likely than another to engage in deviant behaviour (Aute et al., 2020). Somewhat surprisingly, females scored higher for deviant behaviour compared to males.

These are intriguing findings that contradict previous studies indicating that males are more likely to participate in deviant behaviours in comparison to females (Aute et al., 2020; Dullas et al., 2021) and that there is no significant difference between males and females in terms of deviant behaviours (Fitriana et al., 2022). These rather contradictory results might be attributed to the fact that this was a female-dominated study, as female participants were higher compared to males. Unequal participation in terms of gender may have led to findings contrary to previous research findings. Moreover, males are usually more inclined to be involved in deviant behaviours than females (Aute et al., 2020). However, these findings demonstrate otherwise. Therefore, involvement in deviant behaviour is may be dependent on specific values held and taught by both males and females through their surroundings (Dullas et al., 2021).

Limitation of Study

This study has certain limitations that should be highlighted. Firstly, the variables in this study were examined using self-reported questionnaires which may be susceptible to memory, prejudice, and concealment. This method also reflects a retrospective design, which may impair the accuracy of self-reported ACEs, the true prevalence of ACEs may be underestimated. Furthermore, since the data are cross-sectional, no definite inferences about the causation of the relationships between the variables can be made, especially when the data are from undergraduate students from various universities in Malaysia. As a result, the study's findings may not be generalised to young adults outside of the university setting.

In addition, the measure of ACEs only included counts of dichotomous occurrences and did not account for the frequency, intensity, duration of the exposure or the specific offender of each adverse event. Future research ought to dive more into these variables, which undoubtedly influence the effect of an adverse encounter. Moreover, there may be other ACEs not mentioned in this research that could be key predictors of deviant behaviour but were not captured, such as the loss of a loved one or parent, being exposed to violence in the community, and discrimination. Future research ought to examine additional types of ACEs and how they link to deviant behaviour. Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings of this study can assist doctors, academics, politicians, and the general public understand the links between ACEs and deviant behaviour.

Recommendation for Future Research

The present study also recommends that future research should investigate the influence of different combinations of ACEs on the likelihood of deviant behaviour. This is because previous research has shown that a certain combination of ACEs can predict a certain type of deviant behaviour (Gomis-Pomares & Villanueva, 2020; Garrido et al., 2018; Caridade et al., 2019). In addition, future research should also focus on cross-cultural aspects to investigate the diversity of predictors of deviant behaviour. As Malaysia is a country with many cultures, exploring cross-cultural aspects could lead to interesting results. Finally, future studies should explore and identify the protective factors that encourage young adults to become more resilient instead of engaging in deviant behaviour in the future. By understanding how protective variables contribute to resilience, practitioners and professionals can emphasis building these elements and qualities in all young adults who have experienced ACEs, thus minimising the impact of ACEs.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the current findings add to the growing body of evidence on the detrimental effects of ACEs on deviant behaviour by demonstrating the clear association between ACEs, gender and deviant behaviour among students in Malaysia. The findings also highlight that what happens to a person in childhood can have a lasting impact. Furthermore, the findings of the current study point to the need to educate the public about the potential negative effects of ACEs in young adults. Greater knowledge of ACEs can help practitioners identify young adults at risk of exhibiting deviant behaviour in the future. In the future, more effective assessments and interventions can be implemented to prevent the onset or continuation of deviant behaviour by considering the predictive influence of ACEs.

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