Reviewer’s report

Title: Profiles of Family-focussed Adverse Experiences through Childhood and Early Adolescence: The ROOTS Project, a community investigation of adolescent mental health

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Reviewer: Corina L Benjet

Reviewer’s report:

This manuscript has some strengths but also some important weaknesses. The greatest strength is the novel approach of dividing adversity exposure into developmental periods, but the authors do not fully exploit the questions that can be addressed with this approach. The main weakness of the study is the measurement of adversity, specifically the lack of detail to evaluate the reliability, validity and content of the adversity variables and the use of mothers to report on parental abuse and other areas where they are unlikely to report negative and potentially incriminating information on themselves and their partners. Below are more detailed comments:

Abstract: [Minor essential revisions] In the background section the statement “Few studies have characterized the nature and associations between adverse experiences over the childhood years” is not quite accurate since there have been recently quite a few studies. In the methods section of the abstract the authors write “Adversities were recorded in three time periods” This may mislead readers to believe this is a prospective longitudinal study which it is not. This could be clarified by adding the word “retrospectively” after “recorded.”

Introduction:

The introduction is adequate. [Discretionary revisions] In the first paragraph of page 5 (third paragraph of the introduction) the authors write “Many simply record CAs as present or absent irrespective of the number of CAs reported. Others assume the predictive value to be in the total number of CAs and group individuals based on total scores. “ It should be noted that quite a few studies recently are using modeling approaches which capture the type of adversity and the number of adversities simultaneously (Kessler et al., 2010 doi: 10.1192/bjp.bp.110.080499; Benjet et al., 2010 doi:10.1016/j.jpsychires.2010.01.004; Green et al, 2010, Arch Gen Psychiatry). The inter-relatedness of exposure to adversities is addressed in Benjet et al., 2009 doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.03.002.

Methods:

[Major compulsory revisions] The description of the interview doesn’t provide enough detail to understand how family discord, maternal affection/engagement, parenting style, and child maltreatment were assessed. Because this appears to
be an unstructured interview it is not clear how this was systematized and whether the measures are reliable or valid. I am not surprised for example of the strikingly low rates of child maltreatment as mothers are asked to report on behavior which might incriminate them or their partners. It also seems challenging to use the MINI to have mothers respond on behalf of all family members for each time period.

Results:

[Minor essential revisions] Under the heading “Association of longitudinal class with psychopathology” the authors should remove the statement “Exposure to atypical parenting (class 4) almost doubled the OR for NSSI and increased it by 1.5 for depressive disorders” as this is clearly not a significant association, the confidence interval is 0.8-4.8 for the former and 0.6 to 4.1 for the latter.

[Minor essential revisions] Under the heading “Gender, psychopathology and longitudinal class” the authors refer to “an inverse association between psychopathology, longitudinal adversity class and gender”. This more appropriately should be described as sex moderates the association of adversity class with psychopathology.

[Discretionary revisions] On table 1, I suggest including a column for presenting the frequencies of adversities at any time during the three stages.

[Discretionary revisions] On all figures and tables, I would change the label of “parenting” to “atypical parenting” or “atypical” if the former is too long.

[Major compulsory revisions] As stated in my general comments I think the authors could use their reports on the three time periods to ask questions which would further enhance the contribution of this study. For example, does the risk of psychopathology depend upon the developmental period in which the adversity is experienced such that exposure to adversity in one period has a greater magnitude of association with psychopathology than at another period? The question stems from animal research that suggests a period of sensitivity in early development. Does low adversity in later childhood and early adolescence mitigate the risk for psychopathology among those who experience severe adversity in early childhood? Do youth with consistent exposure to adversity throughout the three periods have the same risk for psychopathology as those youth for whom early and later childhood have low adversity, but then experience moderate/severe adversity in early adolescence?

Discussion:

[Minor essential revisions] The third paragraph of the discussion which refers to 20% probability and 10% probability, are the authors referring to frequency or probability of what? Wording should be clarified.

[Major compulsory revisions] The third paragraph: because the findings of atypical parenting are novel, it would be helpful to have a clearer picture as to what is meant by atypical parenting or deficient parenting.
The sixth paragraph: the authors’ statement that “Our atypical parenting class was associated with NSSI and depressive disorders” is not accurate as the confidence intervals include 1.00. Additionally, it should be pointed out that no adversity class was associated with higher odds of anxiety disorder and the atypical parenting class was not significantly associated with any diagnosis.

[Major compulsory revisions] The authors should acknowledge the limitation of asking mothers to report on potentially self-incriminating behaviors and that this has likely led to an underreporting of child maltreatment and possibly a minimizing of deficient parenting.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests' below