Reviewer's report

Title: Patterns of childhood adverse events are associated with clinical characteristics of bipolar disorder

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Reviewer: jill littrell

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The revised version of this study fails to address my previously stated reservations with this study.

Major Issues:

(1) The authors acknowledge that a self-report measure of child-abuse can be affected by the current mood of the respondent. They cite prior research (on page 14, Etain et al.) where the researchers found no association between the report of child-abuse and research-participant’s mood at the time of survey completion. The authors had mood ratings available (PANASS) as well as results from their measure of childhood trauma (CTQ). Is there some reason why the authors did not analyze whether mood as assessed by the PANSS was associated with the CTQ? The authors also did not report whether the CTQ was administered at the same time as the PANSS. What was the time delay?

(2) Problems with demand characteristics remain. The authors indicate they do not know how many potentially eligible research-participants chose not to participate. Information regarding how the study was advertised in recruiting subjects might have further clarified whether a selection-bias was operating. Moreover, it was unclear what the clinical interviewers knew about the purpose of the study. In their responses to reviewers but not in the manuscript, the authors indicate that complete blinding was impossible. The authors failed to clarify in their manuscript that the structured interviews were completed prior to completion of the CTQ. The caveats should have been acknowledged in the discussion section. Readers of this manuscript may have concerns regarding whether interviewers or research-participants were alerted to the hypotheses being tested in this study.

(3) The authors did report on the numbers in their sample who carried diagnoses of Bipolar I, BPNOS, and Bipolar. Numbers did preclude testing whether findings were specific for only particular types of Bipolar categories. However, the authors could have deleted the 26 Bipolar IIs and 12 BP-NOS and analyzed whether the relationships among the variables obtained for Bipolar I research-participants.

(4) Given the overlap Bipolar diagnoses and borderline personality diagnoses, a discussion of whether the present results replicate prior reports of an association
of prior child abuse and borderline personality should have been presented. The authors’ defense seems to be that prior researchers reporting the same associations also failed to assess personality disorders. Additional research in an area is published when it rectifies the inadequacies of past research. Mere replication of prior findings based on faulty methodology does not advance the field.

(5) The authors found that self-reported child abuse was positively associated with worse Global Level of Functioning, more prior depressive and mania/hypomania episodes, and younger age of onset but more self-reported child abuse was associated with fewer hospitalizations. I’m assuming that the age of onset, number of previous episodes, and Global Level of Functioning were determined by the clinical interviewer based upon the subjective reflections of the research-participant. More clarification of the process through which the clinical interviewer arrived at the age on onset should have been provided. The measures of severity of disorder (age of onset, number of prior episode, presence of psychosis, and Global Level of Functioning) predicted by previously child abuse were all subjective measures, whereas the more objective measure of disorder severity (number of prior hospitalizations) was inversely related to prior child abuse, This pattern calls into question the meaning of the findings.

The problems with this study derive from the manner in which the variables were assessed. Variables were assessed by clinicians who were basing their conclusions on the subjective reports of research-participants. The authors do acknowledge on page 13, that the measure of child abuse is a self-report measure. However, the authors could have provided more information regarding how the data were collected. Many of these research participants probably met criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder, whose main defense mechanism is splitting (distorted perception of reality in overly positive or negative terms). Thus, whether the variables reflect objective reality is unclear. While the researchers could not remedy these issues given how the available data was collected, these problems should have been acknowledged more fully. Thus, the manuscript fails to meet journal criterion 6 (Are limitations of the work clearly stated).

Minor problem: on page 12, first paragraph, second line from the bottom of the paragraph, “it is worth to mention” should be changed to “it is worth mentioning”.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have no competing financial interests. My only salary is from the university at
which I am employed.