



Predicting Intimate Relationship Health from Adverse Childhood Experiences Among United States Air Force Active Duty Personnel

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BACKGROUND

- Marriage health is of high importance to the military; most men and women serving in uniform are married.
- Across the military services, rates of divorce are significantly higher for women than for men.
- Potential contributing factors include: 1) stress of balancing multiple and competing work and family roles and 2) higher prevalence of sexual harassment and assault for women in the military
- An additional hypothesis is that a greater proportion of women entering the military may have experienced adverse events during childhood relative to men, and these background factors increase the odds of impairments in adult romantic relationships.
- The purpose of the study was to test for the associations among current relationship functioning, childhood adversity, and gender using a representative sample of married men and women in first year of enlistment.

METHODS

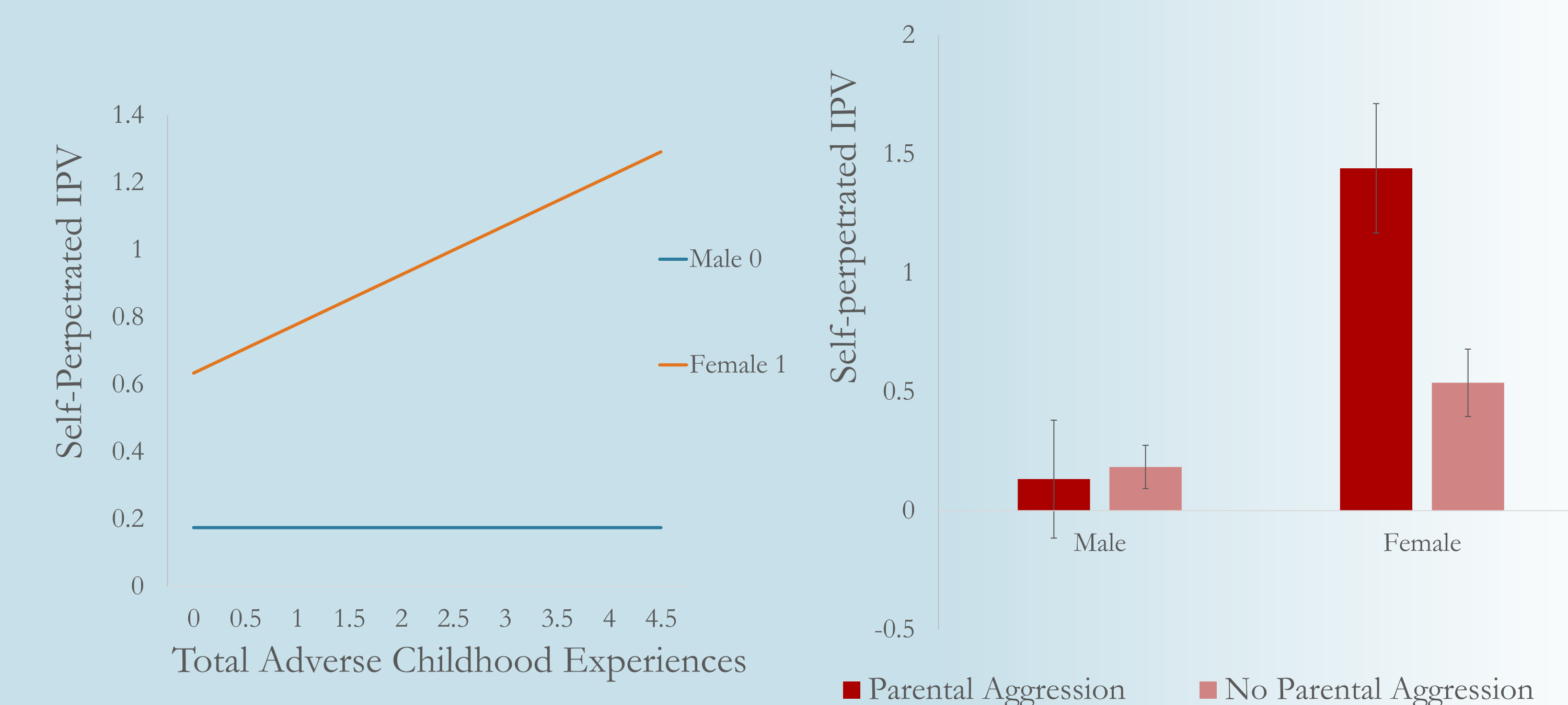
- Cross-sectional analyses were conducted using baseline data obtained from 373 married, entry-level Airmen (119 female, 254 male) enrolled in a longitudinal study.
- **Measures:**
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Scale (Felitti et al., 1998) assessing (a) emotional, physical, or sexual abuse (b) emotional or physical neglect (c) parental separation or divorce, or parental intimate partner violence (IPV) and (d) individual dysfunction of a family member.
- The Marital Satisfaction Inventory – Brief form (MSI-B; Whisman, Snyder, & Beach, 2009) is a true-false, 10-item self-report measure of relationship distress. Only 5-items were included in the current investigation.
- Communication Danger Signs (Stanley, Markman, & Witton, 2002), a 7-item measure designed to detect dysfunctional patterns of communication associated with relationship distress.
- Conflict Tactics Scale – Revised (CTS2; Straus, et al., 1996) assesses physical aggression perpetrated toward, and experienced from, their partner.

Air Force married women had higher levels of couple dysfunction and adverse childhood experiences compared with Air Force married men in an entry-level military sample.

Moreover, women with a history of parental violence perpetrated more violence in their romantic relationships than women with no history of parental violence and men with or without a history of parental violence.

RESULTS

- This was a relatively healthy sample. Only 7.5% reported clinically significant relationship distress; 88.9% did not engage in any form of intimate partner violence in the last 6 months.
- Woman reported a significantly higher mean-level of adverse childhood experiences ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 2.22$) compared with men ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.79$) ($t(370) = -4.56$, $p < .001$) and higher levels of couple dysfunction ($F(1,365) = 9.29$, $p < .01$).
- ACE and gender were both significant and independent predictors of current couple functioning ($F(2, 369) = 12.91$, $p < .001$).
- Women were more likely to report self-perpetrated violence compared with men ($B = .496$; $F(2,369) = 7.52$, $p < .01$). There was a significant gender by ACE interaction, $F(3, 369) = 6.35$, $p < .001$, suggesting that for women, and not men, adverse childhood experiences were significantly associated with self-perpetrated violence in the past 6 months.



CONCLUSIONS

- Our current findings based on cross-sectional data from an entry-level (technical training), relatively healthy sample of married Airmen, support the hypothesis that gender differences in childhood adversity and differential effects on current couple functioning may be one contributor to disparity in divorce rates between men and women in uniform.
- Our ongoing study has the opportunity to more thoroughly evaluate these associations across the first two years of military enlistment.